When the House Falls Down

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/818199.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Underage Sex
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Naruto
Relationship:	Uchiha Sasuke/Uzumaki Naruto
Characters:	Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura, Sai (Naruto), Hatake Kakashi, Uchiha Itachi, Team Taka (Team Hebi)
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of When the House Falls Down
Collections:	John's NaruSasu Fics for Emotional Healing
Stats:	Published: 2013-05-26 Words: 40,323 Chapters: 14/14

When the House Falls Down

by sowell

Summary

When the house falls down, all that's left is to rebuild.

Part I: Capture; Chapter 1, in which Team Kakashi captures Sasuke and attempts to love-bomb him into submission

Sasuke only takes his eyes off of his opponent for a second – just a second to check Karin's status. It's a second too long.

It's not his attacker who does him in. The ninja he's fighting is nothing special. Sasuke had sensed them tailing Hawk nearly an hour before their team attacked. Most likely bounty hunters, smart enough to recognize the dark Akatsuki robes, but not smart enough to run.

No. He'd been able to fight the ninja without even using his Sharingan, half his mind focused on watching his team. The attack that does him in comes from somewhere else. He hears the whistling of the kunai before he sees it, hurtling toward him from the upper right. Only it doesn't hit him. It hits his opponent directly between the eyes, spraying blood over both of them. Sasuke whips around, Sharingan instantly at the ready, but it's too late. A flash of orange and a sharp prick to the back of his neck coincide with the ground exploding under him. He springs away, eyes probing for his teammates, but thick clouds of dust are rising from the broken ground, curling around the toppled trees and the boulders rolling like marbles. He can't see two feet in front of him.

And whatever drug they shot him with is beginning to take effect. Everything darkens as the corners of his vision go blurry. He stumbles, but he doesn't fall. The collar of his robe twists against the back of his neck, and he's hauled up like a rag doll. Far away, he can hear Karin calling his name.

"I got him," a familiar voice shouts, triumphant.

Damn it, Naruto… he thinks weakly, and then everything goes black.

*

Sasuke dreams. Voices drift in and out of his conscious mind, conjuring up images from the past. He dreams that he's back in Konoha, and Itachi is alive. He's on his big brother's shoulders, and he gazes up at the tree branches moving sedately past them. He can see the village in the distance, the four great heads carved into the mountain, watching. Protecting.

The rock that Itachi sets him down on is large enough for them to talk face to face, despite the height difference. There's a small smile on Itachi's lips, but his eyes are grave. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Sasuke knows that this is wrong. He's seen this expression on his brother's face before, and it wasn't here in the forest. There's something all too familiar about this. Familiar and horrifying.

As a hurdle you must overcome, I'll always be there for you. Even if you hate me.

Sasuke hears the words as clear as day, even though Itachi's mouth doesn't move. His big

brother just looks at him with that gentle smile. Sasuke searches his brother's expression until his eyes begin to water, making the familiar face shimmer and blur in front of him.

That's what being a brother is.

Sasuke jerks as blood starts to leak from Itachi's eyes and mouth. He tries to scramble back, but he's paralyzed by the gruesome contrast of Itachi's kind expression and the blood rushing down his cheeks. He can only stare in horror as Itachi's face transforms slowly into Naruto's, red eyes swirling into blue, black hair turning to blood-matted blonde.

Suddenly, everything is on fire. Flames lick up every tree trunk, bathing the forest floor in an eerie red glow. Naruto is on the ground, his body and Itachi's laying side by side with dead, staring eyes. More bodies litter the landscape, some on fire, some missing limbs, all dead. Everything is burning in an endless circle around him, and his sword is dripping with blood. He's covered in it. The world is on fire, and somehow Sasuke knows it's his doing.

He tries to remember why he's here, but all he can recall is fire and pain. Aside from that, his memory is blank. The flames are closing in, eating away at the ground, tugging at his clothes. There's no escape, and he'll burn like everything else.

He falls to his knees and screams.

*

The first thing Sasuke sees when he opens his eyes is soft pink hair drifting against pale skin. Sakura's blurry figure looms over him, two fingers against his carotid artery.

"You're awake," she comments with a quick smile. "I'm glad." She doesn't halt whatever she's doing, presumably checking his pulse. His head is still fuzzy, but it only takes him a moment to realize his arms and legs are firmly bound. He feels unaccountably weak.

"The drug is suppressing your chakra." Sakura answers his unspoken question without looking in his direction. "It's Tsunade-sama's special concoction. We figured the ropes alone wouldn't be enough."

She's frustratingly close; it would be easy break free and knock her out if he didn't feel so damn woozy. As it is, he has to content himself by leveling a stare at her. His Sharingan doesn't take much chakra at all anymore. A few seconds of eye contact and it will all be over.

Except she doesn't look him in the eye. Interesting. She's learned something in the last three years, then.

"Whatever you're doing," he says, "It's pointless. I'm not going back to the village. Naruto is stupider than I thought if he hasn't gotten that through his head by now."

She sits back. "Why was your team headed in that direction, then?"

He doesn't answer. As much as he wants to spill his hatred of Konoha out on Sakura, it

would be pointless. Unlike his former teammates, he's learned to keep his mouth shut.

Sakura smiles again. She's grown, he notes dispassionately. Back at Orochimaru's compound he was so focused on Naruto that he'd barely noticed. She'll never be a beauty, but she's not the gawky girl he left behind. Her eyes are still warm, but there's a tempered wariness to them that she never showed around him before.

"We've been following you for days," she tells him. "Naruto wanted to try and take you right away, but Kakashi made us shield ourselves behind those bounty hunters. It was a good plan."

Kakashi. Sasuke wonders if he'll get to see his old sensei before he escapes. Maybe even fight him. And Naruto. Naruto should be right next to Sakura in this dim little room, yelling at Sasuke about friendship and bonds and Home Sweet Konoha. But as far as Sasuke can see, the idiot is nowhere to be found.

Sakura rises gracefully to her feet, leaving Sasuke staring at her knees. Her shins are covered with cuts and bruises of every shape and size.

"Is that it?" he can't help but taunt. "No other words for your first love?" Her composure is throwing him out of balance. He's frustrated that he was caught, frustrated by his helplessness, and, most of all, frustrated that he's sitting here, having a conversation with one of the very people he should be killing.

Her hair hides her eyes as she tips her head forward, but he sees the blush rise in her cheeks. "You've gotten so strong, Sasuke-kun," she says softly. "We never would have captured you if you weren't already distracted. We all know that. Even Naruto."

Sasuke eyes her warily as she lays a hand on his cheek. "Even though you don't want to be here," she whispers, "I'm glad to see you." Her fingers slide down his face to find the pressure point on his neck. "Now sleep a little longer."

She presses lightly, and he loses consciousness again.

*

The next time Sasuke comes to, he's alone. Or at least, that's what he thinks. He shifts his shoulders a bit, trying to find the faulty points in his bindings. Predictably, there are none. He's still weak, but his head's a little clearer. If he concentrates hard enough, he should be able to –

"Please don't."

Another, more recently familiar, voice comes at him from the far corner of the room. Coal black eyes stare at him out of a blank, pale face. The new one. Sai. His replacement. So they're taking turns guarding him, then.

He merely looks at Sai from across the room, not bothering to hide his disdain. If Konoha

thought this newest member of Kakashi's squad would be strong enough to stop him, they were sorely mistaken. He ignores Sai's unblinking stare, blocking out his surroundings. Just enough chakra for a few moments of Chidori. Once the ropes were burned off, he could escape using speed alone. He bows his head, concentrating.

"Please," Sai says again, polite and impersonal. "You're still very weak, but if you try to escape I might have to hurt you. I'd rather Naruto-kun not become angry with me."

"Scared of Naruto," Sasuke sneers. "Pathetic."

Sai smiles the way he smiled when Sasuke first laid eyes on him, mouth tipping up in an expression as sweet as it is empty.

"I owe a lot to Naruto-kun," Sai says. "He is…my friend. But he's your friend as well, and I think if I hurt you, Naruto wouldn't like it." He pauses for a moment, tipping his head to the side. "Although, it would be smarter to kill you. Naruto-kun and Sakura-san trust you too much."

Sasuke feels his own beast rise up in him eagerly. He smiles, feral. "Go ahead."

Sai seems to be seriously considering it. He stands, drawing his sword. Sasuke wills him to come closer, to actually make an attempt. If he can engage him in battle, if he can just get his hands on that weapon…

"Sai!" Naruto barks from the doorway. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Sasuke looks up, meeting Naruto's eyes for a brief, charged moment. Naruto looks away first.

Sai stops, mid-step, and turns to Naruto. The two of them stare at each other from across the room, communication passing silently between them. It was odd how Naruto was always able to manage that. Of course, the real problem with Naruto wasn't getting him to communicate – it was getting him to shut the hell up.

The two teammates seem to come to a consensus, and Sai relaxes, sliding back down the wall to resume his position in the corner. Naruto stands over him impatiently.

"It's my turn," he says. "I'll take over."

"No," Sai answers calmly.

Naruto frowns. "What?"

"No," Sai repeats. "Kakashi-sensei told me not to leave you alone with Sasuke-kun. I'll stay."

"What?" Naruto says, outraged. "He doesn't trust me?"

"Your teammate tried to kill you last time you met," Sai says, unmoved in the face of Naruto's indignation. "It's for your safety."

“I don’t need your protection,” Naruto yells, incensed.

“Naruto.” Sakura’s silhouette appears in the doorway. “I hate to agree with Sai, but I think Kakashi is right,” she says worriedly. “You - ”

Now. Sasuke’s Chidori flares to life, incinerating his bindings before anyone can blink. The ropes crumble to dust around him as he leaps to his feet. He sees Naruto’s eyes widen an instant before Sasuke kicks him into the wall. Naruto slides down, unconscious.

Sai rushes him. Sasuke turns the Sharingan on him, catching his attack and flinging him back. He manages to get a hand on Sai’s sword in the process. Sai lands firmly on his feet, but Sasuke throws the sword after him, spearing him through the shoulder with his own weapon. Sasuke sees Sai sink to his knees before he turns to the exit.

What the *fuck* did they inject him with? Sasuke can almost feel his energy ebbing. Five seconds of fighting and he’s without chakra, without speed, and without weapon. He stumbles toward Sakura’s frozen figure, trying to shake the cobwebs from his vision.

There’s a look of set determination on her face. “I’m sorry,” he hears her say in a low voice, just before a hurricane crashes into the side of his face. The blow lifts him off his feet and slams him against the far wall. He feels the concrete crack against his spine, tastes the skin split inside his mouth. He crumples face first to the hard-packed floor, coughing blood.

“Sasuke!”

Gentle hands roll him onto his back, and then Sakura is looming over him anxiously. He tries to focus his eyes on her, gasping through his crushed ribs.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats, and he hazily notes that there are tears in her eyes. “Stupid,” she says angrily. “Why did you do that?”

“Fuck,” he hears Naruto moan from off to the side, and then he blacks out again.

*

The third time Sasuke wakes, he’s staring directly into bright blue eyes.

Naruto’s face is inches from his own, and his eyebrows are scrunched into a glare. Without preface, he reaches up and flicks Sasuke in the forehead. Hard.

“You knocked out two of my teeth, asshole,” Naruto growls.

“You should know better than to let your guard down like that,” Sasuke says coolly. “Did they forget to teach you even that in Konoha?” Naruto’s scrowl deepens.

He’s tied up again, tight enough to cut off his circulation. He doesn’t make the mistake of trying the Chidori a second time. Whatever they’re keeping him doped up with, it’s potent enough to sap nearly all his strength. He’ll simply have to find another way to escape.

He figures he's been a prisoner for at least twelve hours. Enough time for Hawk to track him and formulate a plan. That was, if Suigetsu and Karin hadn't killed each other by now. Or if Suigetsu hadn't decamped altogether.

Kakashi is lounging in the far corner of the room, conspicuously ignoring them. He has a typically florid novel in his hand, seemingly engrossed. For a split second, Sasuke feels like he's twelve again. Like maybe if he keeps arguing long enough with Naruto, Kakashi might come over and separate them, or give them some lame mission as punishment.

He shakes off the déjà vu. His days with Team 7 are so far away that they might as well have never happened at all. In any case, it has no impact on the person he is now.

When he chances another glance, Naruto's eyes have taken on a sly cast. The blonde looms even closer, putting his face right next to Sasuke's. "You're not in such great shape either, baka."

He pokes a finger in the vicinity of Sasuke's jaw, and Sasuke winces. For the first time, he realizes he's aching all over. He can feel the medical tape circling his ribs underneath the ropes, and the entire right side of his face is throbbing lightly.

Naruto regards him smugly. "Sakura-chan took care of you in one punch. Pretty cool, huh?"

Sasuke keeps his expression carefully blank, but his brain stutters. *Sakura* did this to him? He recalls the incredible force behind her blow, mind whirling. So she's not just a medic, then. He'd have to be more cautious.

"Anyway," Naruto says, settling back with a contented sigh. "We got you. You won't get away again."

Sasuke watches Naruto through narrowed eyes for a few moments. He looks far too pleased with himself. "Now what?" he says eventually. "You bring me back to Konoha and turn me over to the Hokage?"

Naruto shrugs. "That's the idea. They'll probably want to put you in ANBU custody, but I can convince Granny Tsunade to go easy on you. It's not like you're Konoha's enemy or anything."

Sasuke grits his teeth and says nothing.

"Besides," Naruto is staring at him quizzically now. "There's no more reason for you to stay away." He smiles a little wistfully. "I heard that Itachi is dead. That means you're free, right?"

Free, Sasuke thinks emptily. He wouldn't be free until every ninja in Konoha suffered they way Itachi had. His eyes fall shut for a moment, replaying the ghostly pressure of Itachi's fingers against his forehead. *Sorry Sasuke, this is the last time*. He can almost feel Itachi's blood slipping across his skin.

His throat feels as dry as dust. “I won’t stay,” he says. “I cut my ties with Konoha a long time ago.”

Naruto’s face has always been pitiably transparent. Sasuke can see his frustration now, turning the ninja’s eyes stormy. “Where else are you going to go, huh? What are you going to do – keep running missions for those Akatsuki pieces of shit? They’re murderers and traitors and I don’t believe you’ve turned into one!”

“You never had a clue about me,” Sasuke says icily. “Don’t pretend to know me now. Whatever path I choose is none of your business.”

“Fuck you,” Naruto says, low and murderous. “I knew you better than Orochimaru ever did. That’s why I won’t give up. I know the old Sasuke is still in there.”

Stupid, stubborn Naruto. It would almost be amusing if it wasn’t so annoying. “You still don’t *get it*, do you?” Sasuke says sharply. “There’s nothing here to salvage. We’re not friends, and we never were. Not the way you seem to think.”

Naruto’s on his feet now, fists clenched. “That’s not true,” he yells. “You may have cut your ties, but I never stopped thinking of you as a friend.”

“Useless,” Sasuke mutters, turning his face away.

“Hey!” Naruto gives his foot an angry kick. “Don’t you dare dismiss me when I’m talking to you. *I’m not finished*. Ow!”

He grabs his head, then glares up Kakashi. Sasuke had forgotten how quickly his old sensei could move. Kakashi knocks Naruto across the back of the head again, then gives him a perfunctory shove toward the door.

“Enough,” he says.

“But – ”

“No more for tonight.” Kakashi’s voice is firm. “Go help Sakura with the med kit.”

Naruto’s mouth tightens in displeasure, but he does as he’s told.

Sasuke watches him go. He realizes he’s clenching his jaw and slowly, deliberately, relaxes it. He wills his composure back into place, feeling Kakashi’s eyes on him. Naruto was a child – that was all. Stupid, reckless, naïve. He could argue until he was blue in the face and he’d never change Sasuke’s mind.

Sometimes it was hard to remember, though, when Naruto was being so…Naruto. So loud and orange and *there*. He’d done a good job of blocking out the memories over the last three years, but every once in a while, they snuck through. Now he realizes that the memories couldn’t quite compare to the sheer *energy* of Naruto in the flesh. Five minutes of arguing,

and Sasuke already feels worn out.

“We’ll rest here for a few more days,” Kakashi says, and Sasuke jerks out of his reverie. His old sensei is still looking at the door where Naruto exited, but there’s no doubt who he’s addressing. Sasuke wonders what it is about Kakashi that reduces him to a schoolboy. He feels like that now, scowling at the ground like he’s a student in detention instead of a hostage in a life-or-death situation.

“Naruto and Sakura have been chasing you for a long time,” Kakashi continues. “They need to recuperate before they head back.”

He finally turns to Sasuke and looks down at him out of one dark eye, inscrutable as ever. “They think, because they captured you, that the hard part is over. I’d like to let them celebrate a bit before – well.”

Something flares in Sasuke. Kakashi knows, then, what Naruto can’t see; he understands that Sasuke’s made his decision. He’ll never come back. Not the way Naruto wants. Sasuke should feel relieved, but he feels oddly uneasy instead.

“Sakura and Naruto would never be able to take your life.” Kakashi’s voice is casual, friendly. “Their devotion is absolute.”

“But yours isn’t?” Sasuke guesses coolly.

“For their sake,” Kakashi says, “I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Sasuke smiles grimly. “I think you’ll find I’m much harder to kill than before, Kakashi-sensei.”

Kakashi’s expression doesn’t change, but the tension in the room slowly sharpens to a razor’s point. In spite of himself, Sasuke feels the hairs rise on the back of his neck. As often as he’s observed Kakashi in battle, he’s never had that steely expression turned on him before.

Then, without warning, Kakashi’s visible eye crinkles into a smile. “True enough,” he chuckles. “You’re not exactly the rookie I trained three years ago, are you?”

Sasuke watches through narrowed eyes as Kakashi returns to his corner and picks up his book.

This is nothing, Sasuke tells himself. This is just one more obstacle along the path to revenge. He overcame Orochimaru, he can overcome this as well. Kakashi’s team is an enemy like anyone else.

But for some reason Sasuke can’t stop remembering Naruto at the Valley of the End

“What the hell are you?” he’d asked, watching the chakra swirl up menacingly.

“A friend!” Naruto’s voice had been choked with tears. His shirt had still been ripped from

where Sasuke put a fist through his chest.“That’s why I won’t give you up to Orochimaru.”

Sasuke closes his eyes. Naruto had failed then, and he’d fail this time, too. And Sasuke can’t figure out why that doesn’t make him feel any better.

Chapter 2, in which Sasuke is a baby chick

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this,” Itachi says, rolling his head to the side to look at Sasuke.

“Go away,” Sasuke tells him. “You’re dead.”

“I remember,” Itachi says wryly. “And whose fault is that, anyway?”

The hill they’re sprawled out on is endlessly soft and green. Every once in a while, the same breeze pushing the clouds across the sky sweeps over the grass down below, cooling them both.

Sasuke feels a spurt of the same helpless anger he lived with all those years in Konoha. Powerlessness. Even now, it haunts him. “You *wanted* me to kill you,” he says. “Madara told me everything.”

“Madara,” Itachi sniffs. “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

“Then what?” Sasuke asks, frustrated. “You made me think that the massacre – everything – was your fault.”

“And you fell right for it,” Itachi says pointedly. “What kind of shinobi are you?”

Fuck. Sasuke realizes there are tears stinging his eyes. “If you didn’t want to die, then why didn’t you just kill me?”

“I made you strong, didn’t I?”

Sasuke’s fists curl into the grass. “You made me hate you.”

Itachi’s not looking at him anymore. He’s staring straight up at the sky. “You never hated me. You loved me, just like I loved you, little brother.”

Sasuke curls on his side, turning away from Itachi. “Go away,” he says again.

It’s no use. Itachi’s face appears in front of him again, smiling lightly. “Hey, it’s your subconscious,” he says. “I’m dead, remember?”

Sasuke closes his eyes and buries his face against his arm, tuning out the vision.

“About Naruto,” Itachi’s voice comes from the darkness.

“Naruto nothing,” Sasuke mumbles. “Shut up.”

“He’s still in danger, you know.”

Sasuke’s eyes open at that. “What does that mean?”

Itachi's ghost is indolently chewing on a piece of grass, and Sasuke's relieved his subconscious got at least a few details wrong. Itachi would never do something as frivolous and undignified as *chew grass*.

As though reading his mind, Itachi spits out the grass and grimaces apologetically. "What kind of trouble do you think he'll be in if Madara gets his hands on him?"

Itachi definitely has his attention now. "Why would Madara care about Naruto? He wants the fox. That's all."

"And what do you think happens to the host? You didn't think Madara was planning to keep Naruto alive, did you?"

His sudden comprehension is reflected in his older brother's eyes. Sasuke's teeth click together. "I don't care," he lies.

"Really?" Itachi says, surprised. "With the fox under your control, you could flatten Konoha easily. That's what you want, right?"

"What I want, right now, is for you to go away," Sasuke says coldly.

Itachi shrugs. "Well, you know what you have to do." He presses a kunai into Sasuke's hand, and Sasuke stares down at it. Where had that come from?

Itachi spreads his arms, gently, openly. "C'mon Sasuke."

The knife glints dully in his palm. Sasuke looks up at Itachi's waiting figure. He takes a deep breath, then jams the weapon into his brother's chest. The world disintegrates around him, and he's falling.

*

Sasuke jerks awake. He fights back the disorientation of the nightmare, trying to get a grip on his surroundings. The light never changes in this monotonous little room, but his instincts and his stomach tell him it's evening.

Sakura is in the corner, sharpening a kunai by hand. The metallic scrape is a constant echo in the small space, like acid on his eardrums. It's been three days since he was captured, and no sign of his team. He wonders briefly if they're dead. The lethargy hasn't receded from his body, and Sasuke figures Sakura's keeping him drugged via his food and water. There's not much he can do if he doesn't want to starve to death.

At least he's been re-tied every time he wakes up. The constant change in his positioning keeps the circulation moving through his body. Sasuke wonders if Sakura's doing it because of her medic training, or simply out of some misplaced sense of compassion. Then he realizes that he shouldn't care either way, and he ruthlessly flattens the curiosity. The longer he's around Naruto and Sakura, the harder it is to keep thinking of them as enemies.

It's not that he's begun to think of them as *friends*, exactly. It's just a little hard to hate a group of people so utterly clueless. They chatter and bicker like they're students on an

academy field trip instead of active shinobi warriors. Especially Naruto. After the last three days, Sasuke's convinced he thinks of nothing but girls, ramen, and beating Sasuke in battle.

Not much has changed in three years.

Naruto is standing over Sakura now, hands on his hips. "Please," he says.

"No."

"*Please*."

"No."

"Sakura-chan," he whines.

Sakura stops sharpening her knife long enough to glare at Naruto. "Quit being annoying. Kakashi-sensei said no."

"Just five minutes," Naruto cajoles.

Sakura swipes her kunai at Naruto's legs, and Naruto barely manages to evade it. "Jeez," he mutters.

Sai pushes the door to Sasuke's prison open, bearing two brown paper boxes. He frowns when he sees Naruto in the room in addition to Sakura and Sasuke.

"Naruto-kun," he says in disapproval. "If you keep pestering Sakura-san she'll have no choice but to beat you senseless again." Naruto scowls in response.

Sai's arm is still in a sling from the wound Sasuke inflicted on him. The painter glances uneasily in Sasuke's direction, and Sasuke lets his Sharingan fall into a lazy, warning spin. Sai's mouth turns down, and he looks away.

Sakura looks from the packaged meals, to Sasuke, to Naruto, and then back to Sai. Her mouth curls in a slow smile that has Sasuke remembering his own split lip and broken ribs.

"You know what?" she says. "I changed my mind."

Naruto blinks at her. "Really?"

"Sure. In fact, you can take over right now," Sakura says in a sweet tone that Sasuke doesn't trust one bit. Naruto whoops. He does a garish little victory dance that looks like nothing so much as a frightened chicken, and Sasuke feels a headache start to form right between his eyes.

"Sakura-chan, you're the best! I owe you two – no, three bowls of ramen. When we get back, I'll - " Then he stops short as Sakura's full intent sinks in.

"No," he says flatly.

Sakura shrugs nonchalantly. “Suit yourself. Of course, if you manage this without screwing up, Kakashi might actually let you take your own shift instead of standing here and bugging me all the time…”

Naruto looks like he swallowed something particularly sour. He glances briefly at Sasuke’s face, and Sasuke returns his gaze impassively.

He sighs, shoulders drooping. “Fine. Give it to me.” He holds out his hand with dubious enthusiasm.

“This is not a good – ” Sai begins, troubled.

Naruto cuts him off by snatching the field meal from him. “I said I’d do it,” he snaps.

Sakura smiles again – a real one this time. “Good,” she says, satisfied. Naruto’s staring morosely down at the meal in his hands. Sakura heads for the exit, but she stops briefly by the door before leaving the room. Her back is to Naruto, and Sasuke can see the edge of apprehension in her face. Her voice, however, is bright when she speaks. “We’ll be right outside. If anything happens, you know we’ll be here in a second.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Naruto retorts.

Sai still hasn’t moved. “I disagree with this plan,” he tries again. “It’s not – ”

“Come on.” Sakura forcibly yanks the painter’s reluctant figure through the door. “He needs this,” Sasuke hears her say quietly, before the door closes firmly behind them.

Naruto approaches him like he would a coiled rattlesnake, and Sasuke watches the blonde ninja just as warily. He seats himself a few feet from Sasuke and opens the box.

“Don’t even think about it,” Sasuke says, before he can stop himself.

Naruto’s cheeks are pink. “I have to,” he grates. He holds out a rice ball to Sasuke without looking. “Just…take it okay?”

Sasuke keeps his mouth firmly shut. Letting Sakura feed him was one thing. She’d managed to be fast and impersonal about it, and if she blushed a few times, well...she got over it quickly enough to avoid any discomfort.

But Naruto’s a different matter altogether. Sasuke’s pretty sure he’d rather let Kakashi give him a sponge bath than let Naruto feed him like a baby chick.

“I’ll make you,” Naruto threatens.

“Dobe, if you value your fingers, you’ll keep them away from my face,” Sasuke says darkly.

“Damn it,” Naruto seethes. “Why are you so difficult? Just eat.”

“No.”

“Do it!”

“No.”

They both stiffen as a snort of laughter drifts through the closed door.

Naruto’s face gets even redder, but his mouth sets in a determined line that Sasuke knows all too well. “Come on, idiot,” he growls. “If I don’t get you to eat this, they’ll never leave me alone in here again.”

He’s right. Sasuke does a quick mental calculation. He doesn’t want to be alone with Naruto any more than necessary. The ninja has an inexplicable ability to get under his skin. On the other hand, Naruto is undoubtedly the weak link in this current operation. Naruto’s sheer emotionality is more likely to present a chance to escape than any of his other captors.

Moreover, the thought of escaping from *Naruto* is somehow even more attractive than the thought of escape in general. He hasn’t lost a fight to Naruto yet – he won’t let himself be outmatched this time either.

Distastefully, Sasuke opens his mouth the tiniest crack.

“Good boy,” Naruto says, before shoving the whole rice ball down his throat without warning. Sasuke immediately coughs up half the grainy stuff, glaring at Naruto’s self-satisfied smirk.

“Are you trying to kill me?” he sputters. “No wonder they don’t let you do anything around here.”

Naruto’s eyes narrow at that, and he sticks a finger right in Sasuke’s face. “How would you know what I can and can’t do?” he says accusingly. “You haven’t been around for the last three years.”

“It only took a second to see how pathetically little you’ve improved,” Sasuke says coolly, and Naruto’s eyebrows pull together thunderously.

“Asshole,” he says. “Just wait until we get back to Konoha. As soon as you’re untied I’ll *show* you what I’ve learned since you left. You’ll be begging me for mercy.”

“Unlikely,” Sasuke says succinctly. “Your whole team was useless last time we met. You alone I could probably take here and now.”

Naruto makes a sound like a snarl in his throat, inching forward, and Sasuke realizes this is going to be even easier than he thought. If Naruto just comes within Sasuke’s range of motion, it will all be over quickly. Just a little closer….

It doesn’t quite happen, though. Naruto takes a breath and relaxes, then lets his mouth fall into a rueful smile. “You’re a bastard, you know?” he says.

“And you’re a moron,” Sasuke snaps back. He doesn’t even realize his Sharingan has kicked up again until Naruto claps a hand over his eyes.

“Forget it,” he hears Naruto say through the darkness. “Don’t pull that freaky eye stuff on me if you don’t want to get blindfolded for real.”

Sasuke bites back his own snarl and forcibly relaxes his shoulders. Very slowly, Naruto removes his hand. Sasuke glares into suspiciously good-humored blue eyes.

“You know, this actually isn’t bad,” Naruto says thoughtfully, feeding him a bit of protein bar. “I’m a little jealous. You get fed by Sakura-chan every day.”

“Feel free to take my place,” Sasuke offers mildly.

“Figures you wouldn’t appreciate it,” Naruto says, sounding discouraged. “Sakura’s never fed *me* before.”

“Yes, she has,” Sasuke replies without thinking. He groans inwardly as Naruto’s eyes snap to his.

Sasuke knows what he’s remembering: the first day Team 7 was together, the three of them sitting exhausted on the training ground. Sakura had reluctantly, distastefully, offered up some of her lunch to her starving teammate.

“That’s right,” Naruto says softly.

Sasuke doesn’t remember much about that day. His main recollections center around an acute frustration at Kakashi’s superior level of skill and a profound irritation at the weakness of his teammates. But for some reason he can clearly see Sakura holding out her food to Naruto, and Naruto gleefully, dopily accepting it.

Unexpectedly, Sasuke feels something in his stomach clench. Naruto’s face is expressionless, but there’s no hiding the sadness in his transparent eyes. Sasuke looks away.

“I’m done,” he mutters.

Sasuke expects an argument, but he doesn’t get one. Instead of fighting, Naruto merely closes up the box and stands. “Okay,” he says absently.

The door opens almost instantly, and Sasuke sourly hopes Sakura at least enjoyed the show. She doesn’t look much better than Naruto, though.

Naruto hands the box off to her with a slight smile and a “thanks,” and then he’s gone.

Sasuke watches him, barely paying attention as Sakura takes Naruto’s place on the floor in front of him.

“He did it for me, you know,” she says, and Sasuke jerks his head back toward her.

“The first time he went after you,” she continues in a soft voice, “I asked him to do it. I made him promise. I was so in love with you, but I knew I couldn’t make you listen to me.” She looks down at her own hands, twisting the cloth of her shirt into wrinkles. “I think, when I couldn’t stop you that night – that’s when I figured it out. You and he had a bond that was

beyond what I shared with either of you. I couldn't touch it. I knew Naruto was the only one who could convince you to come back."

Sasuke wishes she'd stop talking. He's not sure whether the churning in his gut is anger or sadness, but the important thing is that it's not hate. It's something else entirely, something that he thought he'd left back in Konoha.

She doesn't stop. "Then when he came back," she says, her voice growing slightly stronger, "that's when I realized he'd almost died. And it would have been my fault. I promised that next time I'd go with him, and I'd help."

Sasuke desperately searches for something cutting or discouraging to say, just to make her *stop already*, but he can't come up with anything. He doesn't know this Sakura. Her face and her voice are the same, and she still looks at him out of the widest green eyes he's ever seen, but everything else is different.

"So I'm here," she says, low and resolute. "But this time I'm doing it for him. And I don't care what you try. I won't let you get away, and I won't let you hurt Naruto again."

She looks him directly in the eye for the first time. "Since you left, all he's wanted is to bring you back. There's nothing I won't do to make that happen for him."

Sasuke feels like he's fallen into some sort of fucked-up dream world, where everything is backwards and upside down and nothing does what it's supposed to do. Maybe he's still asleep, and any second now Itachi will pop up with more cryptic messages and useless confessions.

"Sakura – " he starts. *I don't know what to tell you. I don't have anything you want to hear.*

"That's all," she cuts him off, rising. "I just wanted to say that."

Sasuke's left staring wordlessly after her.

*

After that, they leave Naruto on guard duty by himself a few times a day. Sasuke watches and waits for a chance to escape, but he finds himself getting distracted.

Naruto talks, no – Naruto *babbles*. It's not nervous babbling. Sasuke doubts Naruto's ever had a bout of nerves in his life. It's just a sheer love of hearing his own voice. He hums, he sings, he mumbles, he imparts what Sasuke can only assume is*every single detail* of the last three years in the leaf village. Sasuke feigns disinterest, but there's something about Naruto's steady stream of chatter that's soothing. He's missed it, he realizes in dismay. It always annoyed him when he lived in Konoha, but after three years of Orochimaru's sinuous murmur and Kabuto's silent smirk, it's somehow reassuring.

Naruto also fidgets. Ninja are supposed to understand stillness; when Kakashi, Sai, or Sakura guard him, they all pick a spot in the corner, find something productive to do for a few hours, and then *stay there*. Naruto can't stop moving. He's up, he's down, he's hurling mini-

Rasengan spirals at the walls, arbitrarily creating clones to spar with, hanging from the ceiling, or hovering over Sasuke, depending on his mood.

One time he spends his entire shift hurling grains of rice at Sasuke's forehead, measuring how accurate he can be. Sasuke temporarily switches his master plan from a simple escape to torturing Naruto for a few hours in slow and creative ways.

Despite Naruto's idiocy, it's another two full days before the opportunity for escape presents itself. Sasuke wakes from dozing to hear Sai and Naruto exchanging guard duty. He's pretty sure it's still the middle of the night, but he lifts his head anyway as Naruto plops in front of him.

"Rise and shine," Naruto announces. "I have a present for you."

He pulls a thermos from his pack, and despite his best efforts, Sasuke feels a flicker of interest. Now what?

"A trick the pervy sage taught me," he continues with a wide smile. "Best thing to relax in the field."

"You idiot. Ninja aren't supposed to relax in the field," he says, exasperated.

Naruto makes a face "That sounds like an uptight Sound rule," he says matter-of-factly. "Well, that's not Naruto's Way of Ninja."

Sasuke raises his eyebrows. "What's your newest brilliant rule?"

Naruto twists open the top of the thermos, and the fumes of alcohol fill the room. Black whiskers curve into a grin. "Sake."

Chapter 3, in which Sasuke takes his chance

And Sakura-chan's stomach," Naruto says dreamily. "And her legs, when she's training with the old lady… Everything bunches up, and you can almost see right up to that little curve where - "

"If she catches you talking about her like this, she'll put you in the hospital," Sasuke remarks blandly.

Naruto grins loosely. "Nah. She has it bad for me. She tries to pretend, but I can tell."

"You're a moron," Sasuke tells him, for probably the thirtieth time in the last hour.

Just like the previous twenty-nine times, Naruto only sighs happily. He holds out the thermos for Sasuke's consumption and, very slowly and carefully, Sasuke drinks. He's not sure why he's indulging this latest bonding attempt on Naruto's part. He tells himself it's in the name of escape, but the truth is that the wine is making him feel warm and relaxed in way that's far too dangerous to his own resolve. Maybe all the orange has hypnotized him, he muses.

Naruto's had about four times the amount of alcohol Sasuke's consumed, and it's beginning to show. He figures it'll be another thirty minutes, tops, before he'll be able to catch the blonde off guard. In the meantime, Sasuke merely has to wait and watch Naruto weave his own downfall.

His captor takes the thermos back, black whiskers turning down without warning. In his current state, it only makes him look vaguely befuddled. "That damn Sai," he mutters. "Always trying to show me up in front of Sakura. Ass." He swallows again, frowning.

As far as Sasuke can tell, Sai has no interest in anything outside of mission parameters and a strange fixation with Sasuke's and Naruto's bonds, but trying to convince Naruto of that in his current condition would be like trying to shove a square peg through a circular hole. He merely says, "I don't think you have to worry about the painter."

As quickly as they appeared, the clouds flee from Naruto's face. "Heh. That's right. You showed him, didn't you?"

"How would you know?" Sasuke replies. "You were already unconscious."

Naruto gives him a sloppy-drunk grin and clumsily pokes him in the chest. It's so reminiscent of Itachi that Sasuke feels the bile rise in his throat.

"I forgive you," Naruto says, obnoxiously cheerful.

"I didn't ask for forgiveness," Sasuke reminds him too quickly, and Naruto's grin takes on a feral edge.

“I. Don’t. Care,” he says emphatically. “I forgive you anyway. That’s what friends do.”

“We – ”

“"*We’re not friends*',” Naruto cuts him off, mimicking Sasuke’s deep tones. “I know.” He waves his hand dismissively. “You’re like a broken record.”

“If you’d get it through your thick head, I wouldn’t have to say it all the time,” Sasuke shoots back.

Naruto smirks. “I get it. I just think you’re full of shit. There’s a reason you didn’t kill me three years ago, and it wasn’t on a goddamn whim.”

“The reason doesn’t matter,” Sasuke says tiredly. “Any friendship that might have existed between us was purely by accident.” Naruto’s mouth tightens in an angry line, but Sasuke keeps going. He has a driving desire to make Naruto *see*, to make him finally understand what Sasuke’s been telling him all these years. “My emotional ties to Konoha ended the night Itachi left. Nothing after that day had any meaning to me, except to prepare me to fight my brother.”

Naruto takes another long pull of sake, glowering around the rim of the thermos the whole time. “You’re more annoying than I remember,” Naruto says after he swallows.

Unbelievably, inappropriately, Sasuke has to squash down a small smile. He can’t suppress the faint curl of nostalgia that drifts through him, though. Three years hasn’t crushed Naruto’s single-minded determination and, in spite of Sasuke’s frustration, he can’t help but be glad of that fact. Sasuke spent his time with Orochimaru carefully carving out the few emotions that Itachi’s slaughter left intact. But Naruto’s emotions are as close to the surface as ever. Sasuke wants to be disdainful, but he can’t deny a deep, underlying relief.

Sometimes Sasuke wonders what would happen if he met Naruto years down the road, only to find the ninja hardened and hollowed out. He thinks that maybe that Naruto would be someone to fear, and it’s been years since he was afraid of anyone. Sasuke never, ever wants to look into Naruto’s face and see himself staring back.

He reins in his wandering thoughts with effort. Maybe he’s a little drunk after all, he thinks wryly.

Naruto is silent for a few minutes before his face pulls into a semblance of seriousness. His forehead scrunches in concentration as he tries to give his slurring words some gravity. “I never told you,” he says, carefully dropping each syllable like a stone. “I never told you about Itachi.”

Sasuke’s heart rate trips over itself, then doubles its previous pace. “What about him?”

“Jerk,” Naruto says darkly. “That jerk tried to tell me you’d attack Konoha. He used his stupid eyes on me, and his stupid birds…” Naruto trails off, glaring violently at his own

reflection in the aluminum thermos. Sasuke leans forward, waiting for him to finish, but Naruto just tips his head back and drinks again, mouth pulled down into a frown.

He raps his heel against the ground to get Naruto's attention. "Naruto, focus," he says harshly. "When did you see my brother?"

Naruto scratches his head. "Uh….a while ago, I guess."

"A while ago, *when*?"

Naruto looks annoyed. "Before you killed him, *obviously*." His mouth puckers into a frown. "That two-faced freak said you might have died, too. We were worried, you know." His voice is accusing. "You couldn't have sent a memo, or a snake, or even one of those weird teammates of yours to let us know?"

Sasuke's pretty sure that, if his hands weren't tied, he'd be throttling Naruto. He takes a deep breath. "He didn't try and take you, then?"

"Who, Itachi? Like he could," Naruto says loftily.

Sasuke fights the urge to roll his eyes. Naruto is looking down again, and the wheels in his brain are almost visibly turning. Painfully, creakily, but turning nonetheless.

"Itachi, he…" Naruto stops, and Sasuke sees his fingers curl.

"What?" he asks in dread.

But Naruto only looks puzzled when he raises his head. "He…did something to me," he says slowly. "He was talking about you, and Konoha, and choices, and then…" Naruto shudders.

The back of Sasuke's neck begins to prick with unease.

"He says…he says he gave me power. And that he hoped I wouldn't have to use it." Naruto looks him in the eye. "What's with your family and power, anyway? You're all obsessed."

Sasuke's mind is racing. Itachi never did anything without a reason. Had Itachi been trying to warn Naruto, just in case Madara got his way? Was his devotion to Konoha still that strong? Sasuke can't help it; he feels the resentment gathering in him. Damn Itachi anyway. Sasuke's not sure he'll ever be done sorting out his brother's secrets.

"Anyway, he's gone now," Naruto says, yawning. "I always knew you could take him. And you didn't need Orochimaru, either. Me and Sakura-chan would have been enough."

Sasuke's stomach drops. Even with Orochimaru's training, he would have been no match for Itachi if Itachi had truly wanted to kill him. The thought of Naruto and Sakura facing his brother's spinning eyes makes Sasuke's blood run cold.

Sorry Sasuke, this is the last time.

“Now that he’s dead, everything can be like it used to be,” Naruto continues. His eyes are starting to droop.

“No,” Sasuke says. “It can’t.”

Either Naruto doesn’t hear Sasuke’s words, or he chooses to ignore them. He settles comfortably against the wall, closing his eyes. “You’ll see,” he says, faintly slurred. “When we’re back in Konoha, everything…will be fine.” A peaceful smile crosses his lips. “When you’re back home…everything…will be great.”

His head sinks slowly to his chest, and he lets out a little snore.

Trust Naruto to pass out on the job, Sasuke thinks in exasperation. Naruto’s slumped gracelessly against the wall, totally unconscious. Knowing Naruto, it would take an earthquake to wake him at this point. All Sasuke would need to do was get one hand free… just one hand and he could lift Naruto’s kunai, slit his throat, and escape before anyone was the wiser.

He’s pretty sure Naruto would haunt him until the end of time, though, if he killed his old friend while he was unconscious. He already has one ghost following him; he doesn’t need another. He can almost imagine the taunts. *Too much of a coward to fight me while I’m awake, eh?* Nevermind that Sasuke had won nearly every one of their confrontations to date. Naruto lived in his own reality. Always had and always would.

But the leaf ninja looks awfully vulnerable at the moment, silent for once. His chest is rising and falling evenly in a sign of deep, undisturbed sleep. Sasuke doesn’t think he’s ever slept so easily. Not since the night his childhood was ripped to shreds, and maybe not even before that.

Sasuke gently nudges Naruto’s leg with his own. “Naruto,” he says softly.

Nothing.

He nudges a little harder. “Hey moron, wake up.”

It’s no use. Naruto’s dead to the world. There’s no excuse, then. It may be his only chance to escape. He has to take it. He didn’t come this far just to be defeated by a sleeping Naruto.

Sasuke shifts surreptitiously until his bound arms are brushing Naruto’s warm shoulder. He fumbles for the kunai attached to Naruto’s hip, cringing as the circulation returns to his limbs. He painfully walks his back up the wall until he’s upright and the knife is level with Naruto’s throat. The skin there seems paper thin and very pale in comparison to the rest of Naruto's tan. Naruto swallows, and his adam's apple bumps against the knife. Sasuke takes a deep breath, noting with a detached sort of wonder that his hands are shaking. After all these years, he’s about to kill Naruto.

He has a sudden vision of the eight-tailed ox rising up before him, preparing to crush him and

his whole team to death. In that moment, it should have been Itachi's face that rose up in his mind, but it wasn't. It was Naruto, accompanied by Sakura and Kakashi. He'd almost been able to feel the three of them standing solidly at his back. Even now, he can't manage to hate them. Not with the same clean, pure malice he's able to direct toward everyone else.

You have no choice, he tells himself. He forces the vision of Itachi's dead body to the front of his mind, makes himself picture the elders of Konoha, sitting on their thrones above the slain bodies of the Uchiha clan. No. There's no choice at all. He hardens his jaw and begins to press.

Naruto makes a little sound in his sleep, and Sasuke freezes.

"Pork miso…please," Naruto mumbles again.

Sasuke stares at him. Naruto's brow is crinkled in sleep, but other than that, there's no sign of distress, no sign of fear. He's dreaming all right, but it's not the same brand of tortured nightmare that attacks Sasuke on a nightly basis.

Why? Naruto may not have a murdered brother to haunt him, but his life has been far from peaceful. Naruto's seen people die; he's seen people leave him. He's been shunned and ridiculed and defeated and lied to. He's walked around in the same body as a demon for his whole life, and still he sleeps soundly. How?

"Sasuke," Naruto breathes, soft and plaintive in sleep, and Sasuke jerks away. The knife goes clattering to the ground.

Shit. It hits him in a rush, and he thumps back against the wall, sweating. He can't do it.

It's just like it was back in Orochimaru's lair. Sasuke *knew*, he *knew* from the moment Sai said Naruto's name that he'd have a chance to rectify the mistake he made at the Valley of the End three years ago. He'd have a chance to kill Naruto, to get rid of the final tie standing between him and vengeance.

And then he'd seen Naruto and realized he still wasn't strong enough. Instead of just driving a sword through Naruto's heart, he'd baited him; instead of simply wiping all of them out in one blow, he'd stepped inside Naruto's mind and *seen* the thing that Naruto had lived with, day in and day out. He'd felt nothing but relief when Orochimaru put a stop to the confrontation.

All this time, all this distance, for all his vows and all his sacrifices, he still can't kill Naruto. Shit, shit, *shit*.

God, he's fucked up, he thinks emptily. This is his chance. He needs to escape. He needs to get back to his team, to continue on to Konoha, and maybe then he'll be able to find a little peace. He'll never avenge Itachi by cowering helplessly in this prison. He needs to get out.

Naruto slumbers on, oblivious.

He can't do it. He inches away from Naruto, staring at the blonde ninja. His hands are shaking too badly to even think about picking up the kunai anymore. *Weak*, his brain taunts him. *Sentimental*. *Frail*. *Not worthy of the Uchiha name*. It's all true, he thinks numbly. And it doesn't matter.

He watches Naruto sleeping until he hears Sakura's light footsteps coming down the hallway. He closes his eyes, feigning unconsciousness until they come to bring him his morning meal.

*

In the end, the solution comes to him born of desperation and a fear that, if he stays for much longer, he might not want to leave.

Sakura is the first one he targets. She's the one who brings his meals, and Sasuke has noticed her shoulders slowly beginning to relax around him over the last few days.

Her mistake.

Using the Mangekyo is still very, very tricky. His control isn't even close to what Itachi's was, and it's exhausting even when he isn't drugged and tied. But it's the only option he has.

He waits until she sinks down in front of him. He keeps his eyes closed until he senses her at face level, and then he springs the Mangekyo on her. She goes stock still when she catches sight of his eyes, and for a despairing moment, Sasuke thinks he must have failed. But then her own eyes turn heavy-lidded, and he knows he's got her.

She remains in front of him for a swaying moment, and Sasuke wills her to see what he wants – to see him obediently eating the drugged food. Sasuke watches as she eats the food herself instead, ingesting whatever was meant for him. She'll figure it out soon enough – she's a medic after all – but Sasuke figures he has at least a few hours before anyone notices.

When all the food is gone, he closes his eyes and breaks the illusion. He's sweating with effort, but he can feel the triumph racing through him. It will only be a matter of time before he has the same power Itachi had.

Sakura blinks at him for a second, then looks down at the empty lunchbox in confusion. He watches her shake her head before she rises. She turns to go, then hesitates.

"Are you all right, Sasuke-kun?" she asks, brow furrowed. "You look pale."

"Fine," he says smoothly.

Sai is slightly more difficult. He sits in the corner with his sketchbook, painting with precise, deliberate strokes. They guard him in predictable four hour shifts, and Sasuke's found that, without fail, Sai always follows Sakura and precedes Naruto. Throughout the endless

afternoon, Sasuke feels his strength coming back in slow waves as the drug finally wears off. He's gotten used to the sluggish feeling in his brain and body, and the sudden return to normal makes his head whirl.

He gathers up his growing power like grain in a barrel, hoarding it until he needs it. It's a relief to feel his chakra coming back, to feel his control returning. *It must have been the drug*, he tells himself. It was the drug that made him lose his chance to escape the other night, the drug that called up all those old sentimental feelings. If he'd been thinking clearly, he never would have hesitated.

It's difficult to keep the triumph off his face during Sai's shift, but he manages it. He needs to time it just right. If he moves too soon, his energy will desert him and it will all be for nothing. If he waits too long, Naruto will arrive prematurely, and he'll have lost another chance.

He bows his head and pretends to sleep. He's developed a preternatural ability to track the passage of time over the last few years. He can tell, almost down to the second, how much time has gone by in any given situation. He waits until the last two minutes of Sai's shift, until the painter is starting to squirm restlessly and Sasuke expects to hear Naruto's sauntering footsteps coming down the hallway any second.

Like Sakura, Sai goes still when he catches site of the spiraling black pupils. It takes a little more effort to make the illusion work this time, and his vision blurs with blood as he concentrates. *Two minutes*, he tells himself, clenching his jaw. Sakura took at least five. This should be nothing.

It's not nothing. It's exhausting, but when Sai succumbs, Sasuke feels the same triumph sweeping over him. He holds the painter's attention with the Mangekyo and, using the tiny bit of energy he has to spare, shreds his bindings with Chidori.

It almost works. The bindings don't disintegrate like they did the first time, but they weaken. Panting, he focuses all his physical energy in one place, and pulls with all his might.

The fibers of the rope circling his upper arm give way with a soft ripping sound. The ropes loosen around him enough for him to get a hand out. It's just in time, too. Sai snaps out of it in the same instant that Naruto steps through the door. Naruto frowns at Sai's dazed expression.

"You look all…weird," he says. "What's up with you?"

Sai's eyes narrow, sweeping the room, but no light bulb goes off in his expression. "I – Nothing," he says. He gets shakily to his feet, still frowning, and Sasuke watches him exit the room with a conspicuous lack of grace. He glances once back over his shoulder, but then shakes his head and keeps walking.

Sai won't stay fooled for long, Sasuke realizes. He'll figure out what happened sooner rather than later. Sasuke'll have to act quickly.

One more time, Sasuke thinks wearily. Surely he can do it one more time.

Luckily, Naruto is the easiest of all of them. Sasuke doesn't have much energy left, but then – it doesn't take much. He waits only until Sai's footsteps have receded, and then he simultaneously calls up the Mangekyo as he lets the ropes drop.

Naruto's sharp intake of breath is audible clear across the room. "S-Sasuke?" he stammers. His expression slowly trades surprise for shock and horror.

Sasuke knows what he's seeing – Sasuke bleeding, dying, Sai's sword through his chest.

"*Shit*." Naruto's by his side in a flash, shaking his shoulders, fumbling for his pulse . He's so far gone in the illusion that he doesn't even notice as Sasuke delicately lifts his kunai from its holster. He keeps checking Sasuke for signs of life, blue eyes churning with panic.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Naruto's saying. "*Fuck*." He slams an enraged fist into the wall behind Sasuke's head, sending out a spiderweb of cracks. His teeth are bared in anguish. "Fucking *Sai*. That asshole, that fucking traitor, I'll kill him, I swear, I'll – "

He turns his back, ready to launch himself up, presumably to get the others. He comes to a dead halt as Sasuke slips an arm around his neck from behind and brings the tip of the knife to his jugular.

Chapter 4, in which Team Taka returns

Sasuke digs the point of the knife in just far enough to draw blood. “You bastard,” Naruto says tightly. He’s trembling.

“I’ll say it again,” Sasuke murmurs, very close to his ear. “Our bonds make us weak. The only thing that’s important in this world is your own ability. Give up on this friendship, Naruto, or it will end up killing you.”

Naruto’s eyes are downcast. He wraps his fingers tightly around Sasuke’s wrist, as though he can hold Sasuke there with just that alone. “I – ” he starts.

Sasuke knocks him out with one blow.

His heart is hammering inside his chest. He stares down at Naruto’s sprawled body, feeling the nausea spread through him.

It’s the drug, he tells himself. It has nothing to do with guilt.

Finding the exit is surprisingly simple. His sword is standing in the corner, and he picks it up as he creeps through the door. The narrow hallways are deserted and silent, and Sasuke has to sneer at their teamwork. This was what trusting people got you – endangered lives and an escaped prisoner.

Staying upright is the task that takes real effort. Days of immobility combined with his overuse of the Mangekyo are turning his muscles to water. He staggers toward the closest thicket of trees and slams directly into Juugo’s broad chest.

“Sasuke-kun!” Juugo catches him before he sags. Karin’s there a second later, slinging his arm over her shoulder.

“Thank god,” he hears her breathe.

“About time,” Sasuke mumbles, willing his double vision to clear.

Suigetsu smirks at him, sword over one shoulder. “We were about to storm the castle,” he says. “Karin was sure they’d killed you and buried your body.”

“Shut up,” Karin says viciously.

“Their directive wasn’t to kill me,” Sasuke says wearily. “Just...” *save me* “…bring me back to Konoha.”

“That jounin they’re with is a pain in the ass,” Suigetsu continues. “It took us three days to track you and two more to figure out how to break the genjutsu around this place.”

“If you hadn’t felt the need to rest every three miles,” Karin starts hotly.

“Enough, you two,” Juugo says. The impatience in his voice tells Sasuke he’s had to say it a lot in the last few days. He glances over his shoulder. “We need to get Sasuke someplace where we can rest a little.”

“You go,” Suigetsu says. He bares jagged teeth in a grin of anticipation. “Now that Sasuke’s out, I’ll take care of the rest of them.”

“No!” Sasuke’s voice startles even himself. They all turn and look.

“No,” he says again in a more controlled tone. “They’re not our concern anymore. Leave them.”

“But – ”

“No,” he repeats, in a voice that brooks no argument. “We can’t waste time now. We need to move.”

Suigetsu scowls, but he relaxes his sword grip.

“Sasuke!”

The cry comes from the middle of the clearing, anguished and enraged. Sasuke can see Naruto from between the trees, looking wildly around for him. The idiot chased after him all by himself, without even taking Sai or Sakura.

“Damn it,” Naruto howls. “Where the hell are you? Come back and fight me, you coward, you asshole, you stupid bastard, you – ” He continues to hurl insults, and Sasuke can hear the tears in his voice.

Suigetsu glances at him hopefully, but Sasuke quells it with a shake of his head. He takes one last glance at Naruto, standing defeated under the night sky. There’s an odd pain in the vicinity of his chest, like someone squeezing. He turns away.

“Let’s go,” he says.

They’ve only managed to hobble a few steps when Sasuke feels cold foreboding starts to trickle across the back of his neck. Juugo is moving slowly, in jerking, uneven steps.

“Sasuke,” Karin says in warning, drawing back.

“*Now*?” Suigetsu asks in exasperation.

It must be the violence in the air, Sasuke thinks wearily. It would set anyone off, let alone someone as unstable as Juugo.

“Sasuke-kun,” Juugo says in a strained voice, as the black swirls start to crawl across his face. “Run.” He shoves Sasuke away from him, and Sasuke hits his head against the nearest tree, slumping down.

Karin makes a move to help him, and Juugo swipes her away like a bear with a mouse. She lands on her feet, but Juugo stands between her and Sasuke, preventing her from offering any more assistance. Suigetsu's eyes are darting nervously between Sasuke and Juugo, and Sasuke isn't sure if he's deciding how to attack without killing Juugo, or whether to just let Juugo do away with Sasuke altogether. It wouldn't surprise him.

"Karin," Sasuke says, hearing how weak and reedy his voice sounds through his ringing ears. "Get Karin." Suigetsu obeys.

Juugo's almost all the way gone, now; half his face has darkened, and his left arm has doubled in size. Sasuke activates the Sharingan, and nearly doubles over from the impact on his body. He's too weak, he realizes. He barely has enough energy to pick himself up off the ground, let alone stop Juugo. Juugo looms over him, his normally-peaceful face stretched into a skeletal grin. "Die," he says.

His gigantic hand wraps around Sasuke's throat, sliding him roughly up the tree and pinning him there. *This is it*, Sasuke thinks dimly. After all this, after everything, to be killed by his own teammate. Juugo squeezes, and the flow of blood to Sasuke's brain constricts with dizzying immediacy.

"*Rasengan*." The voice comes from his left. From the corner of his darkening vision, Sasuke sees a wall of orange hurtling toward them. The first Naruto hits Sasuke, flattening him to the ground as the deadly wind technique goes spinning into Juugo. Three more clones follow, dragging Juugo down in a vicious struggle. Juugo roars, lost in bloodlust.

"Sasuke! Open your eyes, damnit." The first Naruto, the original, is still lying on top of Sasuke, shaking his shoulders with vigor.

"Get…off me…dobe," Sasuke manages through raw vocal cords.

He looks up into Naruto's relieved face, just as two of the clones pop out of existence behind him. Juugo rises up, his stomach a bloody mess from the Rasengan, his face a mask of rage.

Naruto springs to his feet, putting himself between Sasuke and Juugo. "What is he?" he asks grimly.

Sasuke drags himself into a sitting position against the nearest tree. It's the most he can manage.

"The curse mark," he says faintly. "He's the source." Sasuke has a passing thought that he should warn Naruto not to kill Juugo, but it flits through his tired brain and then disappears.

"Oh, *great*," Naruto mutters. "Is he going to sprout wings, too?"

Sasuke looks up at his strong back, the level shoulders, the ready battle stance. *Why*? His brain is screaming. Why the hell did Naruto always do this? Why hasn't he learned that Sasuke isn't worth this stubborn loyalty, this endless struggle?

Sasuke doesn't have a chance to ask him. Naruto half turns his head, and Sasuke sees a gleaming blue eye and a shock of yellow bangs. "Don't move," Naruto says. "When I'm done with him, you're next." He rushes into battle.

And Naruto in battle is…well, not what Sasuke expected. His personality may not have changed much, but his fighting style has certainly grown. There's no real strategy, no dance-like beauty to the battle. It's inelegant and spur-of-the-moment. That's all the same. But his strength…

He's a whirlwind of movement, substituting sophistication for pure, raw power. He shoves Karin out of the way a second before Juugo's fist comes down on her, and even manages to evade the aimless hacking of Suigetsu's sword. He's quick, and he's inventive, and when it comes down to it, Juugo never stood a chance.

Sasuke doesn't know if it's Naruto's rage or the fact that his personal chakra supplies are dwindling, but after Juugo knocks him down a third time, his eyes start to flash red. The form of the fox encases him like it did so many years ago at the Valley of the End, and his teeth sharpen into fangs. Sasuke's not sure whether to be glad or alarmed. Having faced Naruto's demon side himself, he's half afraid of what will happen if it gets out of control.

But Naruto seems to have himself decently in hand, despite the angry glow of power around him. Suigetsu stops fighting altogether and stares in amazement, and Sasuke hears Karin's stammered, "Th-that chakra…" Sasuke did it with a snake, and Naruto does it with his bloody knuckles, but the end result is the same. The black marks pull back swiftly from Juugo's skin, and the giant is left dazed and shaking as he tries to get his bearings.

Sasuke starts to relax, until he sees the blue-tinged spiral gathering momentum in Naruto's palm, spinning faster and faster. It takes his tired brain a few moments to realize what he's doing, and then it hits him. His two teams are about to destroy each other.

The black whiskers on Naruto's face have thickened, and the expression in his eyes is dangerously feral. The glow of the fox is spreading around him, burning brighter by the second. Juugo is nothing but an enemy to him, and Sasuke realizes he has every intention of killing the giant. Sasuke lays his palm against the tree, painfully propelling himself to his knees.

"Naruto, don't!" he yells. It's too late. Naruto's hand is already drawn back, ready to blast Juugo out of existence.

At the last possible second, Suigetsu rears up between Juugo and Naruto in liquid form, and the spiraling wind cuts harmlessly through him, dampened into nothing by the water. Juugo cowers behind Suigetsu, safe, and Sasuke breathes a sigh of relief.

And then freezes in shock as Suigetsu's solid form materializes, draws back Zabuza's sword and, with a mighty swing, slices Naruto directly across the center of his stomach.

Naruto screams and drops to his knees. Sasuke can see the blood smeared across the blade, thickly red. Sasuke struggles furiously to his feet, trying to reach them.

“Suigestsu, stop!” he commands.

Suigetsu’s sword halts inches away from striking the killing blow, and he and Karin both jerk their faces toward Sasuke, confused. The Kyuubi’s chakra abruptly ceases its rapid expansion. It recedes until it’s just a dull, pulsing glow around Naruto’s prone body, and Sasuke can see the fox withdrawing sulkily into its cage again, simply observing now that Naruto’s intent to kill is gone.

Sasuke knows he doesn’t have enough chakra left to suppress the Kyuubi this time. He can barely maintain the Sharingan at all. He approaches anyway, not flinching as the great yellow eyes focus on him. Naruto’s form is curled in the corner, unmoving.

“Kyuubi,” he calls up.

“You again,” the Kyuubi says contemptuously. “What do you want?”

“If he dies,” Sasuke reminds the demon desperately, “you die.”

“I know how it works, brat.”

“Then heal him.”

The expression in the gigantic eyes is sly. “Took my words to heart, did you?” Sasuke starts as a memory creeps into his brain. *Do not kill Naruto*, the fox had said. *You will regret it.*

Damnit.

Sasuke clenches his teeth. “I’m not finished with him.”

“No,” says the fox, “but I’m finished with you.”

One lifesize tail slams against the ground, and Sasuke’s thrown back in the ensuing earthquake, ejected from the Kyuubi’s prison and Naruto’s mind.

“Sasuke!” Karin is entirely supporting his weight, and Sasuke shakes his head to clear it. “Are you okay?” she asks. Her anxious eyes search his from behind her glasses.

He nods, putting a hand on her shoulder to reassure her. Suigetsu is still standing over Naruto, sword poised.

“What the hell,” he complains. “You almost made me cut off my own foot.”

“Leave him,” Sasuke says, holding his head. “He’s no threat now.” After a few swaying seconds, he manages to stand on his own two feet. Suigetsu scowls, but lowers his weapon.

“Is he dead?” Karin asks apprehensively, and Sasuke holds his breath.

“Not yet.” Suigetsu nudges Naruto’s face with his toe, and Naruto’s head rolls limply to the side.

“What *was* that?” she breathes.

“Are you dense?” Suigetsu says dismissively. “Didn’t you see that chakra? He’s the last jinchuuriki.” He sniffs. “Not much compared to that ox.”

He hefts Naruto’s fallen body over his shoulder like a sack of rice, and Sasuke’s fingers slowly curl into fists.

“Come on,” Suigetsu says, turning away. “We’ve got to deliver this before we keep going, or we’ll have Akatsuki on our tail all the way to Konoha.”

“No,” Sasuke’s voice stops Suigetsu in his tracks. His entire team turns to stare silently at him. “No,” he says again, adopting his most imperious tone. “He’s a leaf-nin. He may have information for us.”

“Are you nuts?” Karin asks. Juugo’s arm is slung over her shoulder now, still bleeding from the first Rasengan and all the other minor injuries Naruto inflicted on him. Sasuke can see her pushing up the sleeve of her robe, preparing herself to heal another one of her teammates. “If Akatsuki finds out we took him for ourselves, they’ll kill us.”

“I told you before,” Sasuke says, glancing briefly at her. “We are the ones using Akatsuki, not the other way around. If they want to come, let them come.”

Suigetsu’s mouth lifts in a sharp grin. “Hell, yes. I’m so ready to – ”

“You three will head out now,” Sasuke interrupts. “I’ll deal with the nine-tails and catch up on the outskirts of the city.”

More silence. They think he’s out of his mind, Sasuke realizes, and he’s not so sure they’re wrong. What is he *doing*? Naruto needs a medic, and the only medic around is Sakura. He’s not about to let himself get captured again when Naruto will most likely die anyway. He should just let Suigestsu hand him over to Akatsuki and be done with it. One less roadblock between him and Konoha.

“Sasuke-kun,” Karin starts cautiously. “I don’t think – ”

“Then don’t,” Sasuke says rudely, and she flinches. “That’s not what you’re here for, anyway.”

Even Juugo lifts his head at that. Suigestsu’s eyes are narrowed and sulky, and Karin just looks troubled.

“Go,” he tells them, “or I have no use for you. Any of you.”

It’s a lie. Strong as he is, he can’t take Konoha on his own. He needs all of them. But something in him isn’t ready for Naruto to die yet. Not yet.

Soon, he promises himself. *But not yet*.

There’s trepidation in his nerves as he watches his three teammates limp off. He breathes and forces himself to think. The area is unfamiliar, Kakashi’s team will be looking for him, he’s still incredibly weak, and to top it all off, he’s just consigned himself to dragging Naruto around with him.

He looks down. Naruto is still unconscious on the ground, and Sasuke wonders how much longer he’ll last. His face is very pale.

Exhaustion washes through him, and he closes his eyes.

Now what?

End Part I

Part II: Release; Chapter 5, in which Sasuke plays nursemaid and Naruto learns the truth

Sasuke lifts the bandage over Naruto's wound to check its progress. The ragged edges of skin are already knitting together, and for an envious moment Sasuke envisions what he himself could do with such inexhaustible chakra at his disposal.

Some of the color has returned to Naruto's face. He's been sleeping for over twenty-four hours, and if he doesn't wake soon to eat, Sasuke's afraid they'll both have to endure another force-feeding session.

The cave they're in is damp and low-hanging, but wide enough for both of them to stretch out with a fire between them. Sasuke's not sure how long he half-dragged, half-carried Naruto before he found it. All he knows is that he didn't even have a chance to set traps around the place before he passed out.

Luckily, Naruto begins to stir before noon. Sasuke watches him from the other side of the cooking fire. He grunts a little and twitches. His eyes crack open, and then he lets out the biggest yawn Sasuke's ever seen. He stretches his arms like he's waking from a nap, then cringes as the action pulls on his stomach.

Naruto frowns and glances down at the stark white bandage across his skin. He takes his time lifting the dressing, examining it, testing out his range of movement, and checking for other wounds. It's a full five minutes before he's satisfied enough with his own condition to lift his head and process his surroundings.

"You know, if I were an Akatsuki member, you'd be dead by now," Sasuke remarks blandly.

Naruto goes still at the sound of his voice, eyes sweeping across the stone walls to meet Sasuke's over the fire.

"I thought you were," Naruto says. He doesn't move, but Sasuke sees the tension invade his limbs as he registers his own situation.

"Hn," is the only response Sasuke cares to give. He watches Naruto climb to his feet. The blonde must still be in pain, but none of it shows on his face.

"Where are we?" Naruto asks curiously, when he's finally upright. "What happened to the big crazy guy?"

"He's fine," Sasuke says. "No thanks to you."

Naruto glowers. "I was trying to save you, you prick. Not that you deserve it."

"I can take care of myself."

Sasuke expects another argument, but Naruto is looking around again. “Where’s everyone else?” His voice is suddenly deadly.

Sasuke considers baiting him a bit more, but both he and Naruto have more healing to do before they start to fight again. He has no doubt that Naruto will attack in full force if he thinks Sasuke harmed the other leaf ninja.

“Don’t worry,” Sasuke tells him. “Since you were stupid enough to charge in without their help, I figured it would be easier to leave them behind.”

“Oh.” Naruto’s shoulders uncoil a bit. Strangely, he doesn’t sound all that upset about finding himself a prisoner. Sasuke wonders if he hasn’t fully registered his situation yet, or if he’s just too thick to understand the danger.

“Now what?” he asks softly.

Sasuke raises an eyebrow. “Now I give you to the leader of the Akatsuki, and he takes the nine-tailed fox.”

Naruto immediately stiffens again. “You’re working with Pain? That asshole killed my sensei.”

“The leader of the Akatsuki is Uchiha Madara,” Sasuke corrects him. He sits back and waits for the anger, the betrayal.

Naruto’s angry all right, but not for the reasons Sasuke expects. His eyes get very wide, and then he points an accusing finger in Sasuke’s direction.

“Are you crazy?” he shouts. “Madara’s the one who set the fox loose on Konoha in the first place. Are you trying to start a war or something?”

“It’s no concern of yours,” Sasuke says calmly. “You’ll be dead.”

“Not in your lifetime,” Naruto growls.

“Are you implying that you could stop me?” Sasuke asks, raising an amused eyebrow.

“If I wasn’t tied up,” Naruto threatens, then stops. He looks down at himself quizzically. “Why aren’t I tied up?”

“Why should I tie you up when you’re barely a danger as it is?”

“Asshole.” Naruto takes a menacing step toward Sasuke, then gasps. His hand flies to his stomach where his wound has started to leak again. “Damnit,” he says, wincing.

“You may heal quickly,” Sasuke tells him smoothly, “but Suigetsu almost killed you. Sit down before you fall down.”

Glaring, Naruto very deliberately leans back against the wall, crosses his arms, and doesn’t sit. Sasuke wants to laugh at the predictability, but he doesn’t want to incite Naruto any

further.

“There’s food,” Sasuke says impassively, gesturing at the fish cooking over the fire. “I’d eat if I were you. You were sleeping for a while.”

Naruto doesn’t have to be told to eat twice. He practically falls on the fish, shoving it into his mouth and spitting out bones at a rate that Sasuke figures will give him a stomachache in ten minutes’ time. His wound has already stopped bleeding again, and Sasuke finally lets himself acknowledge that Naruto will be all right. This time, at least. Sasuke’s not sure *what*will happen if he keeps jumping into battle without thinking.

“I’m not going anywhere, by the way,” Naruto mumbles around a mouthful of fish, and Sasuke’s lip curls in distaste at the site of chewed food spraying everywhere. “Not unless it’s back to Konoha, and not unless you’re with me.”

“Whatever, loser,” Sasuke says wearily. “Eat your damn fish.”

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“What do you think Itachi meant?” Naruto asks later, out of the blue. “When he said he gave me power?”

Sasuke really, really wishes he could answer that question. He shrugs, not moving from his sentinel post at the mouth of the cave.

“Itachi was a master at mind games,” he says. “He probably didn’t mean anything by it.”

For whatever reason, Naruto doesn’t like that option. He scowls. “But – ” he starts.

“I don’t know, okay?” Sasuke snaps. Discussing Itachi is the last thing he wants to do, especially with Naruto. Last night he pushed Itachi off a cliff, only for him to turn into Naruto when he hit the ground. The night before that he and Itachi slaughtered Konoha together, until Itachi took off his mask and Sasuke realized it had been Madara all along. He gets enough of Itachi when he’s sleeping; he can’t take it when he’s awake, too.

“But you knew him better than anyone,” Naruto plows on, oblivious “Didn’t he say something when you were fighting?”

“About you?” Sasuke snorts in disbelief.

Naruto’s eyebrows snap together. “It’s not such a weird question,” he says, annoyed.

“You’re an idiot,” Sasuke says, and ignores him.

“Oi.” Naruto throws a pebble at him, hitting him in the temple, and Sasuke glares. “I’m asking if you think Konoha’s in danger.”

Sasuke takes a few seconds too long to answer. “How should I know?” he says finally.

Blue eyes probe his. “But if it was, you would come back and fight, right?”

Sasuke sets his jaw. “No.”

Naruto slaps the ground in frustration. “Why not? What’s with you, huh? Konoha is your home.”

“No.”

Naruto makes a disgusted noise, getting gingerly to his feet and hobbling over to where his pack is located. Sasuke half-heartedly considers stopping him, but Naruto doesn’t seem to be looking for a fight. Besides, Sasuke already removed anything that could conceivably be used as a weapon.

Naruto bypasses the bag altogether, picking up his discarded orange jacket instead. He shrugs into it, unmindful of the blood stains and rips all along the front. He digs through the pockets, then frowns. He pats his way up and down his chest and turns his pockets inside out.

“My necklace,” he says. “What happened to my necklace?”

“Maybe one of your clones stole it,” Sasuke suggests.

“Ha ha,” Naruto says wryly. “You know, it really creeps me out when you make jokes. I’m serious.”

“How should I know? You were fighting. It probably fell off.”

“No,” Naruto says, voice rising. “I always fight with it, and it’s never.... It has to be here somewhere.”

“Relax,” Sasuke says irritably. “It’s just a necklace.”

“No!” Naruto says, blowing out a frustrated breath. “It’s important. It keeps me from – ” he stops. “Nevermind,” he mutters. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Ridiculously, Sasuke’s feels offended. “Understand what?” he asks. “Your stupid preoccupation with symbols? It’s a piece of jewelry, just like that forehead protector you love so much, or the Akatsuki robes. They don’t mean anything.”

“Oh yeah?” Naruto says, chin tilted in challenge. “Then why do you brand every piece of clothing you own with that ugly fan?”

Instinctively, Sasuke reaches for the Uchiha emblem embroidered into his shirt. “That’s different,” he says shortly.

Naruto’s blue eyes are very calm. “Just because my family isn’t related to me by blood, doesn’t make them any less important.”

“Shut up,” Sasuke says in warning. “You don’t know anything about it. You don’t know what I lost.”

“You’re so fucking smug,” Naruto says, and the viciousness in his voice takes Sasuke aback. “If you’d get your head out of your butt for two seconds you’d see that Konoha took better care of you than your family ever did.”

“Konoha is full of murderers and liars,” Sasuke says coldly, and Naruto turn scarlet with anger.

“Who are you to judge, huh?” he says spitefully. “Your family is the worst one of all. Look at your nut job of a brother.”

“If it wasn’t for Konoha, I’d still have a family,” Sasuke yells, and Naruto’s face goes abruptly slack.

“What the hell,” he asks slowly, “are you talking about?”

Sasuke knows he should keep his mouth shut, but he’s suddenly irrationally furious. He pushes to his feet, looking down his nose at the leaf ninja. “Itachi killed my clan on Konoha’s orders,” he says. “The elders were afraid of Uchiha’s power and what it could do to the village, and so they sacrificed Itachi to keep the peace.”

“That’s a lie,” Naruto says immediately. His face doesn’t match his words, though. He looks like he’s just had something very cold dumped over his head: shocked, dizzy, immobilized.

“No,” Sasuke says. “The only reason I’m still alive is because Itachi spared me to protect me.”

Naruto’s mouth drops. “You actually believe that? Who told you that? Itachi?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sasuke says. “It’s true.”

“Madara,” Naruto sneers. “I bet it was Madara.”

“Yes.”

“Listen,” Naruto starts shaking his head, waving his hands for emphasis. “Do you really think the Hokage would have allowed that?”

“He objected,” Sasuke says flatly. “He was outvoted.”

“You can’t know that,” Naruto says, but his voice is a little less certain. “The Third believed in peace. He would never let – ”

“*Think*, idiot,” Sasuke interrupts forcefully. He’s not sure why it’s so important that Naruto believe him – only that it is. “It’s*because* he valued peace so much that he let it happen. If he had to sacrifice one clan to do it, then he wouldn’t hesitate.”

Naruto lapses into brooding silence. “But – ” he starts, then stops. Sasuke patiently waits for him to come up with another argument. He’s apparently out of ideas, though.

“I don’t believe it,” he mutters to himself, but the doubt is plain on his face.

“Those elders ruined my life,” Sasuke tells him. “They took my brother and my whole family away from me.”

A light flicks on in Naruto’s expression. “That’s why you were headed to Konoha,” he says, hushed. “You’re going to kill them.”

“You’re always talking about bonds,” Sasuke says pointedly. “What would you do?”

“Not murder,” Naruto shouts.

“If they killed Sakura?” Sasuke asks skeptically. “Kakashi? Iruka-sensei?”

Naruto’s expression falls, and Sasuke presses on. “I killed my brother thinking the slaughter was his fault. And maybe it was. But in the end he was just Konoha’s pawn. I refuse to be.”

“Well…then…” Naruto looks stumped for a moment, but then he snaps his fingers. “We’ll tell Granny Tsunade! She’ll fix it. She won’t them get away with it.”

“Just like that,” he sneers. “It’s so easy to bring people to justice in your little world, isn’t it? You don’t *get it*. You never did.” Sasuke hardens his voice. “I want them to suffer. I want them to die, in pain, like Itachi did. I want them to be able to see it coming, to know *why* it’s coming, and still be unable to stop it. Do you understand?”

Naruto’s eyes are saucers in his round face. “It won’t work,” he breathes. “The rest of the village won’t allow it. *I* won’t allow it.”

Sasuke wants to roll his eyes at the conviction in Naruto’s voice. So determined to defend the village that shunned and ridiculed him. Sasuke will never understand Naruto’s commitment to Konoha.

“There are better ways,” Naruto says stubbornly. “If it’s true, then the elders need to be punished. But not like this. Come back to Konoha with me. Sakura and I can help. We’ll talk to the Fifth, and – ”

“What’s wrong with you?” Sasuke explodes. “I just told you I’m attacking your village. Why are you still trying to help me?”

It takes Naruto a few seconds to answer. He looks away, chewing on his lip. “Because,” he says finally. “You’re my friend, and I don’t give up on friends.”

Sasuke’s not sure which desire is stronger: the urge to strangle Naruto or the urge to laugh hysterically. “What do I have to do?” Sasuke asks in amazement. “Are you honestly this stupid? How long are you going to keep this up before you figure out it’s useless?”

Naruto gives him a piercing sidelong glance. “Until I manage to beat you and drag you back to Konoha,” he says. “Or, until you come on your own,” he adds as an afterthought.

“That will never happen.”

“I made a promise,” he answers simply, like that explains everything. “I won’t break it.”

Sasuke ignores the little throb in his chest. He's suddenly bone-weary and sick of fighting. "Your village murdered my family, I betrayed our team, and I tried to kill you," he says in a low voice. "One childhood friendship doesn't matter in the face of all that."

Naruto's fists clench. "I'll make it matter."

"Accept it. We were always meant to be enemies, Naruto."

"Well screw that." Naruto's says hotly. "I don't know who made those rules, but they didn't ask me."

Sasuke feels it again – that strange, inappropriate desire to smile. Only Naruto could say something so stupid and make it sound so damn heroic. They face off for a moment, and then Sasuke turns his back abruptly.

"Fine," he relents with ill grace. "Do what you want."

Naruto makes a noise like he might be gearing up for another argument, so Sasuke says the only thing he can think of to distract the blonde.

"It's time for dinner. I'll get the fire started."

*

They don't speak again until after their bellies are full and the fire has dulled to its embers. The night is cold, but Sasuke doesn't want to attract any attention from the surrounding creatures – human *or* beast. Most of his strength has returned, but he's still not ready for another full-scale battle.

He stares at the flickering glow of the firewood, letting his thoughts chase each other around and around, like children on a ferris wheel. The battle tactics and plans for revenge that have been at the forefront his brain for the last two months keep falling out of focus tonight. Even when Naruto isn't talking, he manages to be loud.

"I was thinking," Naruto starts, and Sasuke stiffens, gearing up for another round. But Naruto doesn't say what he expects. "I guess Itachi wasn't as evil as he pretended."

Naruto's voice is oddly glum, and Sasuke turns to look at him. "What do you care?" he asks.

Naruto lifts a disconsolate shoulder. "I always thought you were on your own, like me. I guess you had someone looking out for you after all."

Sasuke stares at him for a moment. Naruto is looking at the fire, face downcast. The glow reflects against the shadowed blue of his eyes. "Well," Sasuke says, choosing his words carefully. "He still murdered my parents."

Naruto brightens. "That's true," he says, and for a moment Sasuke considers punching him.

Naruto leans his head back against the wall of the cave, and Sasuke finds a place to stretch out on the dirt-packed floor. Everything is dark aside from the gentle glow of the fire pit.

“I’ll figure out a way to fix this,” Naruto says quietly. “Those elders need to pay for what they did to you. You won’t have to kill anyone, I promise.”

Sasuke closes his eyes. “Stop talking and go to sleep.”

“You first,” Naruto retorts.

“Definitely not,” Sasuke says. “I drugged your food.”

Naruto’s bitten-off curse is like a firecracker in the cave, and Sasuke turns on his side to hide his smile. He listens to the silence for another half hour as Naruto’s breathing evens out into steady unconsciousness. Sasuke wishes he could sleep so easily.

Maybe I should have drugged my own food, too, he thinks wryly. The dying light from the fire dances behind his closed eyelids.

*

“Choose,” Itachi says, emotionless.

Sasuke turns a slow circle. The two of them are folded in a thick mist, but somehow he knows he’s back on the Uchiha estate. He can just make out the door to his old home through the fog, the elaborate carvings blurring together.

Itachi is in Akatsuki mode tonight. The dark collar is pulled up around his face, and his eyes are a deep, blood red.

“Choose what?” Sasuke says. “What are you asking me?”

“You have to choose,” Itachi repeats. His voice is like absolute nothingness. It’s the blade of a sword without the edge or flash, the darkness of night without the stars or encroaching dawn. It’s not evil and it’s not violent and it’s not threatening. It floats through the air, detached from the rest of reality.

“Can you stop being so cryptic all the time?” Sasuke says, frustrated. “You’re not even alive anymore. You can quit it with the drama.”

“Make your decision now. You can’t have both.”

“If you’re talking about Konoha,” Sasuke says uncomfortably, “I’ve already chosen. Just because you betrayed Uchiha, doesn’t mean I will.”

“Then,” says Itachi. He points.

A roar splits the night. The nine-tailed-fox is crouched on top of the Hokage’s tower, snarling across the city at the two Uchiha heirs. The creature is enormous, its tails alone kicking up enough wind to make Sasuke sway on his feet.

And if the fox was free, that meant Naruto was…

A sudden breeze dispels the fog, and everything pulls into focus. Sasuke sees that the carvings on the door to his old house aren't carvings at all, but bloodstains. Every building is splashed with it, and there's more running along the ground by his sandals.

Itachi disappears and the blood keeps rising, up to his shins, then his knees. His thighs, his waist, and Sasuke jerks his face upward, not wanting to see.

This is my path, he tells himself, fighting back a scream. The blood is at his chest now, hot and viscous. *This is what I had to do. This is what the ending has to be.* He keeps looking up, and he closes his eyes as it swallows him whole.

*

Sasuke blinks awake. Beneath the fabric circling his right forearm, Naruto's necklace is a solid presence wrapped tightly against his skin.

Chapter 6, in which sex and violence collide in one big ball of ninja hormones

"Fight me," Naruto says.

Sasuke conveys the sum of his feelings with one raised eyebrow.

“I’m serious,” Naruto says. “This cave is boring.”

Sasuke has to concur. They’ve been there for almost three days. Every time he thinks about leaving, though, something pulls him back. He eyes Naruto’s ruined clothing. He can still see the faint remnant of Naruto’s wound across his stomach, just waiting to split open again.

“Forget it, loser,” he says.

“Chicken,” Naruto baits him.

Sasuke returns his gaze coolly, refusing to show his annoyance. “I’m surprised you’re in such a hurry to get beaten, baka, considering you’re still healing from your last injury.”

“Like I’d lose to you,” Naruto scoffs.

“I could just knock you out and solve the problem that way,” Sasuke says pleasantly. Sasuke feels the blue eyes glaring a hole in his side for thirty seconds, and then Naruto shrugs nonchalantly.

“Fine,” he says. “I’ll just go train on my own.” He saunters toward the mouth of the cave, only to halt as Sasuke blocks the way with his sword.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks calmly.

“Are you deaf?” Naruto says rudely. “I said I want to train. Unless you’re going to try and stop me…?”

“Naruto,” Sasuke says warningly, “You’re really starting to piss me off.” It’s true, too. As much as he tries to hammer into Naruto’s head that he’s a *prisoner* and in no position to be challenging anyone, the blonde remains stubbornly, unalterably cheerful. Not even Sasuke’s revelations about Itachi could keep him down for long.

Naruto rocks on his feet, looking far too pleased with himself. “I won’t lose,” he tells Sasuke. “All that time you were running around being Orochimaru’s errand boy, Jiraiya was actually teaching me things. Lots of things. Jutsus that you couldn’t do if your life depended on it.”

Sasuke stares at him. “How the hell,” he asks slowly, “have you made it this long without Sakura killing you? You are so…*annoying*.”

Predictably, Naruto isn't even remotely fazed by that. "Look," he says cockily. "I'll make a deal with you. If you can get past me, I'll leave you alone. I'll stop chasing you and I'll never try and drag you back to Konoha again."

"Your attempts at capture don't concern me," Sasuke tells him. "You're pathetic at it anyway."

Naruto's face darkens momentarily at that, but then he smiles. "If you can get past me," he says, "when I leave here I won't tell anyone about your plan to kill the elders. I'll let you and your team do whatever you want to them."

That's a lie if Sasuke's ever heard one. Naruto can barely keep his mouth shut about minor things, let alone something as big as an assassination attempt. Sasuke lets his face settle into amusement, watching Naruto's mouth tighten. "Again, you couldn't stop me if you tried. Besides, what makes you think you're getting out of here? I may decide to kill you."

A kunai imbeds itself in the soft soil a scant inch from Sasuke's left hand. He's moving in an instant, rolling away and crouching into a defensive stance. It takes a second for him to realize that there's no enemy there. It's just Naruto, casually swinging a second knife like a pendulum. Where the hell had Naruto gotten those?

"Or maybe you're not as good as you think," Naruto says with a smirk. "Maybe you're afraid that I'll end up killing you."

Sasuke looks again, and the thrown kunai has vanished. Illusion, then. But still. Not bad, to be able to catch him off guard like that. Sasuke tilts his head, considering.

"Are you sure you want to make those promises, dobe?" he asks. "You haven't had much luck against me in battle."

"That was then," Naruto says, satisfied. "Things have changed." He's grinning crookedly, all but rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

Sasuke raises an assessing eyebrow. "All right," he says, lifting his sword. "This will be over quickly."

"I wouldn't count on it," Naruto returns. "You're not the only one who's been training for the last three years."

"Then," Sasuke says smoothly, "show me what you can do." He launches an attack at Naruto, with the intent of slipping in behind the other ninja.

Either Naruto's gotten faster, or Sasuke's gotten much, much slower. The leaf ninja flips up and back, using the ceiling to propel himself toward the mouth of the cave. He lands firmly in front of Sasuke again, blocking his path.

"Not bad," Sasuke tells him, feinting left. Naruto counters him easily, swiftly dodging the sword. They dance and swirl around each other for a good five minutes, blonde on black

until, unbelievably, Sasuke feels Naruto's knife slice across his shoulder. Blood starts to trickle.

He withdraws immediately, watching. Naruto stops as well, and there's triumph smoldering in his gaze. "What do you know?" Naruto says softly. "First blood to me." Three years ago he would have lost focus entirely, jumping around and whooping his celebration. Now he just stands, eyes sparkling and body poised. Sasuke wants to punch the smirk off his face.

"It doesn't mean anything," Sasuke snaps. "Keep going."

"Whatever you say," comes a voice from behind him, and Sasuke barely manages to avoid clone-Naruto's fist. When Sasuke's head comes up this time, the Sharingan is firmly in place.

"I'm honored," Naruto says sarcastically. "It's about time you got serious."

"It will just let me kill you more quickly," Sasuke assures him, trying to rein in the growl in his voice. He takes a few deep breaths. Focus. He has the Sharingan; Naruto has nothing but a big mouth and misplaced confidence. Naruto, of course, is far too stupid to be nervous. He still has that damn half-smile on his face, and Sasuke suddenly wants to make it disappear more than he's ever wanted anything in his life.

Sasuke straightens, deliberately relaxing his stance for a moment. "Just like I thought," he says, voice even. "You still haven't learned." Naruto doesn't respond, but his eyes narrow.

"You still think it's about contests and rivalry and medals of honor," Sasuke continues, watching as the tension begins to mount in Naruto's shoulders. "You've never figured out what it takes to become truly strong."

He attacks without warning, and Naruto goes stumbling back, holding his side. Blood leaks from the cut of Sasuke's own kunai. It's a shallow wound, but it's enough to sting. "If you want to win against a powerful opponent, you have to be prepared to kill."

He's back in his place before Naruto even has time to react. Naruto blinks at him, shocked. "Second blood to me," Sasuke purrs, launching two shuriken. They cut across Naruto's right thigh and his upper left arm. "And third and fourth."

Naruto's smile is definitely gone now. His face is somewhere between anger and envy, and his fists are starting to clench. He doesn't speak again. He just charges at Sasuke and begins another attack.

It's easier with the Sharingan; Sasuke can see his jutsus coming a mile away, leaving Naruto with nothing to rely on but speed and strength. There's no denying that Naruto's gotten better, but he's never been able to match Sasuke in taijutsu, and nothing's changed now.

"Getting tired?" Sasuke asks lightly, dodging Naruto's flying fists.

"Of looking at your ugly face," Naruto huffs. In his preoccupation, Naruto's left the mouth of the cave wide open, and Sasuke thinks about charging past him just to rub it in. He doubts Naruto cares anymore, though. They both know it's not about a stupid bet, and it never has

been; it's about this – their strength and their stamina and which one of them will be the last one standing.

"Insults don't help if you can't land a blow, idiot."

As if to prove him wrong, Naruto buries a foot in his stomach. "Is that what Orochimaru taught you?" Naruto retorts as Sasuke leaps away. "Because Jiraiya taught me differently. Sometimes insults are the best weapons you have."

Sasuke watches him, trying to figure out which way he'll move next. "Name-calling only works if your opponent cares for your opinion. Since I don't give a shit what you think about me, it doesn't matter."

Naruto raises an eyebrow. "Really? So you wouldn't care if I called you a traitor?"

Sasuke looks at him sharply. "No."

Naruto performs a few seals, and the cave is suddenly filled with clones. Three attack at once, and Sasuke has his hands full fending them off while the original Naruto keeps talking.

"What if I told you that you broke Sakura's heart? Would that matter?" he asks. Sasuke decapitates all three clones in one swing.

"I don't need to explain myself to you," he says, turning back to Naruto, but even to his own ears his voice sounds tight and angry. "There were reasons I left."

"Like killing your brother? Tell me again how that worked out for you," Naruto says, voice like knives. "Tell me how great you feel now that Itachi's dead."

Sasuke has the point of his sword against his heart before Naruto can move. "That topic," he seethes, "is off-limits."

"I thought my opinion didn't matter?" Naruto says, all mocking innocence, and Sasuke doesn't think he's ever hated him more.

"I won't discuss Itachi with you. You don't know anything about it."

"Know what?" Naruto bites out. "That you fucked up and killed someone who actually cared about you? Why can't you see that there are other people who care about you, too?"

"Listen to me," Sasuke hisses. "I didn't fuck up – I was fucked over by Konoha."

"The only friends you still have are in Konoha."

"I'm done talking about this." He tries to turn away, but Naruto grips his collar in a tight fist, holding him.

"Why? So you can keep pretending that we never existed, and fought with you, and risked our lives for you, you asshole?" Naruto tries to elbow him in the stomach, and Sasuke dodges it.

“Shut up.” Sasuke catches Naruto’s fist a second before it connects with flesh, and Naruto is *still* talking.

“Or what? You’ll try to kill me? Oh, wait…”

“Naruto, shut *up*,” Sasuke screams, and he doesn’t know what he’s going to do, doesn’t know which way his temper is going to tip, doesn’t know how this is going to end, only that there’s too much violence in him and it has to go somewhere.

Naruto starts to slide to his left, but Sasuke catches him by the neck and slams him against the wall. The blonde makes an awful choking sound, struggling furiously. He jabs a knee into Sasuke’s stomach, and Sasuke ignores it, pushing through the pain to pin Naruto in place. He focuses on channeling all his chakra to his fingers. All he’ll need is one squeeze. Barely any pressure at all, and Naruto’s neck will snap.

Naruto’s eyes are a glittering midnight in the shadows of the cave, and Sasuke can practically feel the rage coming off of him. He doesn’t know how Naruto can seem so painfully alive all the time, even when he’s pinned to a wall, seemingly beaten.

Do it, he tells himself. He conjures up the image of Naruto standing below him at Orochimaru’s compound, remembers*how damn much* he wanted to kill him then. God damn *fucking* Naruto, always sticking his nose in places he doesn’t belong, dragging Sasuke back toward the past when all Sasuke wants is revenge. If only Sasuke could obliterate him from the face of the earth. There would be no hesitation then, nothing to distract him from Konoha’s destruction.

Sasuke takes one hand off Naruto’s throat and grips his jaw, immobilizing the blonde’s face. Then he presses his mouth against Naruto’s in a grinding kiss.

Naruto goes still, and Sasuke takes the opportunity to anchor his wrists to the walls of the cave and kiss him even deeper. Naruto’s lips open under the pressure, and Sasuke sweeps his tongue in. He doesn’t know what he’s trying to do; maybe humiliate Naruto into submission, maybe occupy his mouth so he’ll shut the hell up. Or maybe he just wants to absorb some of Naruto into himself, where he’ll be safe from everyone, even Sasuke.

It takes Sasuke a minute to realize Naruto isn’t kissing back. He pulls away slightly, panting. Naruto’s face is slack with shock. His wrists are drooping limply from the prison of Sasuke’s hands, and his blue eyes are searching, probing. He has the feeling that Naruto’s about to start yelling, or asking questions, or doing something equally asinine, so he says the only thing he can think of to goad the blonde into cooperation.

“What’s wrong?” he taunts breathlessly. “Scared?” Naruto’s jaw juts out and his eyebrows snap together. He takes a deep breath, leans forward, and sets his mouth against Sasuke’s.

Like everything Naruto does, the kiss is inexpert, single-minded, and completely volatile. His lips smash against Sasuke’s, warm and dry. His tongue licks across Sasuke’s teeth, and Sasuke shivers. He nips at Sasuke’s mouth, and Sasuke bites down hard in retaliation.

“Asshole,” Naruto growls. Sasuke moves his mouth to Naruto’s neck. He tastes like sweat and dust and burning, pulsing life, and Sasuke swirls his tongue against the rough texture. Naruto makes a sound somewhere between a gasp and a groan, and his fingers tighten with reflexive force on Sasuke’s hair. Sasuke works his tongue over his skin, searching for that noise again.

Naruto is harder than Sasuke remembers, stronger and more solid. Sasuke feels Naruto’s fingers slip over his ribs, and he realizes the blonde’s hands are pushing under his shirt, around his back, up over his shoulders. He presses his whole body against Sasuke, shaking, and Sasuke can feel Naruto’s erection against his stomach.

Sasuke’s own erection is stiffening with quick, urgent need, and he forces Naruto back against the wall, trying to put some space between them.

Naruto is having none of that. His fingers curl tightly into Sasuke’s sides, digging against muscle and bone. “No,” he says, muffled. His breath is a moist puff into the curve of Sasuke’s neck, and Sasuke almost moans.

He can’t remember ever wanting someone like this. Not ever. He’s felt the vague stirrings of desire before - when Sakura brushed too close to him, when Karin looked at him in a certain way – but it was always mild, fleeting, an annoyance even. Never enough to distract him from the task at hand.

But now he feels consumed. There’s no room for anything in his brain but Naruto, and he wants all of him, all at once. He wants to take him and use him and mark him so thoroughly that no one else will ever be able to touch him, and worse – he wants Naruto to do the same to him.

No. *No*. This is not acceptable. Naruto is Konoha; Naruto is his enemy. Naruto will be wiped off the face of the earth in a few weeks’ time, just like the elders, like the Hokage, like Sakura and Kakashi and the mountain and the forest and the city itself. He needs to stop this.

Naruto licks, very lightly, against his jaw, and Sasuke shudders with his whole body. “Stop,” he says hoarsely. “Just– stop.”

Instead of stopping, Naruto opens his mouth to taste, and Sasuke breaks. He spins Naruto in one quick motion and shoves him face first against the damp wall of the cave, holding him there. Naruto grunts, but Sasuke immobilizes him by trapping his arms beneath his body. He dips his hands into the hot hollows of Naruto’s hips and drags his teeth against the back of the tanned neck.

“Let me go,” Naruto says, frustrated, and Sasuke grinds against him, so slowly and deliberately that his eyes start to roll back in his head. This is the answer, then. He’ll just take Naruto like this, without letting him talk, without looking at his face, and that will get rid of this awful, burning need. He twists a hand in Naruto’s hair and forces his face into the stone as he begins to ease down the orange track pants.

Naruto mumbles something, and a second later two hands reach around from behind Sasuke and break his hold. Clones again. Sasuke throws them off easily enough, but then the real

Naruto is on him, tackling him to the ground.

He's kissing Sasuke before they even stop sliding. "Like I'd let you be on top, bastard," he says when he breaks away.

"Get off me," Sasuke returns angrily. He can still taste Naruto, bright and salty on his tongue. He forces the other ninja back, and they grapple, rolling around in the dirt, each of them trying to get the upper hand. Every time Sasuke thinks he's got Naruto pinned, the idiot finds some way to squirm out from under him or turn the tables. They're both panting when Sasuke finally gives up and just levels Naruto with a punch. The blonde goes rolling head over heels and slams into the wall.

He hauls Naruto up and shoves him against the stone again, ready to finish this one way or another. Naruto lifts his head, blood oozing from a split lip and a cut across his cheek. Sasuke knows that in a day's time there'll be no trace of the injuries. Naruto's blue eyes have a manic light to them, and his mouth is…smiling?

What the hell? As Sasuke eases back cautiously, Naruto begins to chuckle, a rich, easy sound from deep in his chest. It's not a happy sound, but it's a laugh all the same, and Sasuke stares at him. Was he *enjoying* this?

"You," Naruto gasps between chuckles, "are so fucked up."

Sasuke feels his rage gathering like a storm as Naruto laughs at him, not making any move to attack, just mocking him with blue eyes and cracked, smiling lips. How could he sit here and treat this like it was a joke? Like it was another stupid boyhood competition between them? This was Sasuke's *life*, unraveling at the seams, and Naruto is laughing.

The blonde ninja barely avoids Sasuke's Chidori-powered fist as it slams through three layers of stone.

"What the – " He turns thunderous eyes on Sasuke, no longer smiling. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he yells. He launches himself at Sasuke, and they go down again. This time Sasuke lets Naruto pin him, glaring up as Naruto glares right back down.

"Bastard," Naruto says. "You don't even know if you want to fuck me or kill me, do you?"

"Neither," Sasuke says coldly. "I want you to leave me alone."

Naruto ignores him. One strong hand slides between the fabric of Sasuke's waistband and the most vulnerable part of his abdomen. Naruto's callused fingers rest on his stomach, waiting. When Sasuke does nothing to stop him, he continues his exploration, taking Sasuke's length in his palm and making a tight, warm fist.

Sasuke doesn't move a muscle, barely breathing. Blue eyes bore with calculating intensity into black as Naruto begins to stroke. Sasuke's back arches as Naruto fist glides over his sensitive flesh. He's beyond fighting at this point, beyond words, beyond resisting. He wants release, and for whatever twisted, godforsaken reason, he wants it from Naruto.

Naruto's weight comes to rest on Sasuke as he strokes, his face turning into Sasuke's neck. "You asshole," he hears Naruto murmur through the roar in his ears. "Do you know how much I missed you?"

God damn fucking Naruto…stupid, stubborn, crazy, loyal….

Naruto's other hand has long since fallen away from Sasuke's wrists, but Sasuke makes no move to reciprocate the caresses. He can't. If he touches Naruto he'll shatter. He can only let the tension coil tighter and tighter in him, closing his eyes as his climax nears.

When it comes, it's powerful enough to drag a moan out of him. Naruto is breathing heavily, too, nuzzling against Sasuke's skin as lightening skitters behind Sasuke's eyelids. Naruto uses his mouth to work his way down Sasuke's chest, then back up again, teeth and tongue and lips no longer aggressive but gentle, placating. Sasuke shudders at the flick of a tongue over his nipple.

When Naruto finally stills, his forehead is pressed against Sasuke's sternum, and his hands are locked onto Sasuke's bare sides. "You won't get away again," Naruto mumbles, more to himself than to Sasuke. "Not this time."

The tingling in his limbs is giving way to drowsiness, and Sasuke makes a half-hearted attempt at fighting it. He should stay awake, to guard Naruto, to make sure Naruto doesn't try anything, maybe to keep kicking Naruto's ass…

It's a losing battle. Sasuke drifts into unconsciousness as Naruto's soft exhales tease his skin.

*

He doesn't dream at all.

*

When Sasuke wakes, a dim half-light is penetrating the cavern's hollows. The hoot of an owl outside and the cooling air tell Sasuke that evening is getting close.

Naruto is curled on the ground to his right, cocooned into the only blanket. Sasuke feels sticky, sore, and oddly detached. His brain is hovering somewhere between panic and apathy, drifting along as his eyes trace the sharp nooks of the ceiling.

Naruto stirs a little, and then his blue eyes drift open sleepily.

Sasuke's mouth is parched and raw, and when he speaks his voice is hoarse. "When I leave this cave," he tells Naruto, "I'm going to Konoha. And I'm going to wipe it off the face of the earth."

Chapter 7, in which Sasuke does something really, really stupid

Naruto blinks in slow motion, closing his eyes and then opening them. “You what?” he asks, voice rusty.

“My team and I are going after Konoha.”

Naruto burrows a little further into the blanket, shutting his eyes. “We already went over this,” he mumbles. “I told you I wouldn’t let you kill the elders.”

“Not just the elders.”

Naruto opens his eyes for real this time. He sits up, and the blanket falls to his waist. His neck is covered in scratches and bruises, and Sasuke quickly averts his eyes. “Not just the elders,” Naruto repeats flatly.

“No.”

“Everyone, then.”

“Yes.”

“Tsunade?” Naruto asks, voice shaking. “Sakura? Kakashi?”

“Yes.”

Naruto looks away, jaw working. “Me?”

“If I have to.”

Naruto laughs, and there’s a bitter edge there that Sasuke’s never heard before. “You never change, do you?”

“You don’t – ”

Naruto hurls the blanket at him, hitting him in the face. “Cut it out! If you say ‘You don’t understand’ one more time I’m shoving my fist down your throat.”

Sasuke says nothing.

Naruto gets to his feet. His face is grim. “Nothing I’ve said has even made a dent, has it? You have to be the stupidest, most stubborn – ”

“I told you from the beginning it wouldn’t make a difference. It’s why I left Konoha all those years ago, and it’s why we fought at the Valley of the End, Naruto.” Sasuke looks away, feeling Naruto’s frustrated gaze boring into him. “I won’t deny that you and I formed a bond of sorts when we were younger. But it can’t compare to the importance of this task. This is

what Itachi left me with. It's the only thing he left me with, and there's nothing you can say to change my mind."

A 'bond of sorts' isn't exactly what Sasuke was feeling when Naruto's hands were jerking him off, but it's all he's willing to give Naruto at the moment. He can't give any more without leaving himself wide open to a whole new set of arguments. He always thought his resolve could stand up to anything, but he wasn't prepared for Naruto's mouth all over his skin and Naruto's weight pressing him into the ground. A few more fights like that and Sasuke's afraid, for the first time in his life, that his will might actually crack.

Naruto's jaw sets. "Fine," he says. "Have it your way." He punches Sasuke in the face without warning, laying Sasuke out on the cave floor for a moment.

Sasuke stares muzzily up at Naruto's colorful figure. His orange-clad shoulders are heaving. He has idea how the blonde still has the energy to fight when he himself feels like yesterday's crumpled up newspaper. "If that's how it's going to be, then fine," Naruto growls. "I guess it's time to get serious."

Sasuke hadn't realized they were playing up until this point, and he opens his mouth to say so, but Naruto's already reaching for him, ready to hit him again.

Sasuke dodges it this time, rolling to his feet and away. "What are you doing?" he asks mildly. Now that he's upright, he can feel the soreness all over his body from Naruto's fists, Naruto's mouth. Kissing Naruto might have been the worst mistake he's ever made.

Naruto's eyes are shooting blue fire. "I told you before," he says. "If I have to break you into pieces to get through to you, then I will. Whether it's on a stretcher or on your own two feet, I'm bringing you back home. I don't care if I have to tie you up again. You *will not harm Konoha*."

He races toward Sasuke again, and Sasuke avoids him by leaping over him, reversing their positions. Naruto turns to face him. He's blocking the mouth of the cave again, and this all feels so exhaustingly familiar.

"If you want out of this cave, you'll have to go through me." Naruto says. His face is set but there's an edge to his voice, and Sasuke hasn't seen him like this since the Valley of the End.

"You already tried that one," Sasuke reminds him.

"And you never did get past me, did you?" Naruto says, a little too cockily for someone who has two black eyes and cuts all over his body.

"This is so stupid," Sasuke says, exasperated.

Sasuke barely manages to avoid the three shuriken that come his way. "Stop talking and fight," Naruto says.

Sasuke faces him across the cave, tracing the familiar lines of his face – friend, enemy, rival, lover. It's all blurred together where Naruto is concerned. "I don't want to kill you," Sasuke

warns him.

Naruto's grin is wild with adrenaline and power. "Could have fooled me," he says. "Don't tell me you're losing your nerve now."

Naruto flings a kunai, and Sasuke deflects it, feeling his temper begin to rise. "If you'd stop and think for a second, you'd realize it's hopeless. One way or another, I'm going to destroy Konoha. If you get in my way, you'll only hurt yourself."

"Spoken like a true prick," Naruto says. "You're the one who's not thinking. Don't you see that Madara's using you?"

"I don't care," Sasuke says through clenched teeth. Sasuke sends a rain of Chidori directly toward Naruto's face. The blonde manages to dodge, but the sparks catch his ankle, dragging a grunt out of him. When he turns to face Sasuke again, he's limping. His expression is still set, though.

Fine. Sasuke breathes fireballs at him from three different angles, giving him just enough room to escape. He sees the danger register on Naruto's face, just before the flames rip across his friend's upper arm. Naruto falters as he grabs the wound, going down on one knee.

"Shit," he says, and Sasuke waits patiently as he gets back to his feet.

"You've gotten stronger," Sasuke says. "But you'll never be equal to me. I don't care how many promises you've made. This – revenge – is in my blood. It's all that I am. All the training in the world can't defeat that."

Without warning, Sasuke crosses the distance between them, attacking with his sword. Naruto's eyes widen at the sudden burst of speed. He just manages to parry the attacks with his own kunai. Sparks explode in the small space as their steel clashes.

Naruto is slower than yesterday; Sasuke can feel it. He's still wounded from before, and his face is starting to turn waxy with exertion. It won't be long before he's completely worn down. And then…?

And then. Sasuke's brain stops there.

Sasuke ducks as Naruto swipes the kunai at Sasuke's face. The move leaves his shoulder and most of his back entirely exposed. Instinctively, Sasuke goes in for the kill. He only registers his own intent in the last second, changing the course of the blade and meeting dirt instead of flesh. He substitutes his elbow for steel, slamming Naruto into the ground.

"Ugh." Naruto goes sprawling into the dirt face first. When he raises his head, his face is encased in rage. Sasuke wishes he would just *stay down* for once. "Quit pulling punches," Naruto says, spitting.

"Be careful what you wish for, dobe," Sasuke says. He puts his blade lightly to Naruto's chest, gathering chakra to flow down the length of it.

Naruto realizes a second too late what's happening. "Fu – "

Naruto's face contorts as the Chidori flows into his body, immobilizing him. His muscles go slack as his mouth strains.

"My war isn't with you," Sasuke says. "It's with Konoha. But if you align yourself with the village, I'll kill you, too."

Naruto's eyes are filled with…not hate, exactly. But there's a mix of rage, desperation, violence, and determination there that pulls at Sasuke's consciousness. Naruto doesn't understand defeat. It doesn't register in his brain. No matter how many times Sasuke tries to explain it, it doesn't get through.

Sasuke's sick of trying to teach him. He can't make Naruto understand short of killing him, and Sasuke's beginning to wonder if there's some sort of short-circuit in his psyche. Every time his brain gives the order to kill his body seems to rebel.

Can he do it now? He looks down at Naruto, trapped beneath his sword, and wills himself to want the blonde dead. He should *want* to crush that absurd naivete, should want to wipe him off the face of the earth.

The thought is ridiculously painful.

If I leave him alive, Sasuke tells himself with deliberate coldness, *he'll never stop*.

Naruto's snarl catches him off guard. Summoning strength from god-knows-where, Naruto slams his hands together in a seal. The ensuing surge of power knocks Sasuke back. He manages to keep his balance, barely, but when his vision clears, Naruto is on his feet again. His arms are tense by his sides, and he's blocking Sasuke's exit.

Where had that come from? That wasn't the fox's chakra. Sasuke's Sharingan probes, but there's only the two of them in the cave, facing off.

"Stupid…*asshole*," Naruto growls and aims a punch at Sasuke's jaw. Sasuke sidesteps it. Naruto tries again, with his elbow this time, but he's tired and he's emotional and the blow doesn't do much besides glance off Sasuke's ribs.

He turns to make another clumsy attack, and almost by rote, Sasuke feels the Chidori begin to crackle in his fingers. He lands a punch to Naruto's stomach and Naruto doubles over. Sasuke braces himself, gathering chakra. Naruto collapses heavily against the wall, and Sasuke can see his legs trembling. Sasuke approaches him, the power spilling out from his palm. Naruto watches him, jaw hard.

"Itachi would be so proud," Naruto sneers, and that is *it*. Sasuke draws his hand back as the cave fills with tense flickers of light. He keeps his face blank, makes himself look Naruto in the eyes. He missed before, but his aim has improved over the last three years. Naruto won't have a chance to evade it this time.

Not that Naruto looks like he's planning to evade anything. He's just staring fiercely at Sasuke, not giving an inch. His chest is heaving with exertion, but there's no fear in his posture. Either he doesn't realize he's about to die, or he's angry enough not to care. The

stupid idiot probably doesn't understand how much it's going to hurt, how quickly it will happen, how he won't have a chance to come up with one of his asinine plans to save the day. He probably doesn't know that once Sasuke touches him he'll just be dead, gone, vanquished, finished, erased. He'll never even get the *chance* to see Konoha go up in flames, to try and save it with his stupid clones and his stupid frogs and his stupid speeches. He'll never open that loud mouth again, and Sasuke won't have to hear him talk or yell or cry or gloat or…

The Chidori sparks and dies. *Shit*.

Naruto gives Sasuke a shove that has nothing to do with shinobi training and everything to do with two teenage boys at each other's throats. "What's wrong?" he says angrily. "You did it before. Don't pretend to care this time around."

"I will," Sasuke threatens. "If you don't shut up, I will." It barely even sounds convincing to his own ears anymore, because god knows he's tried. How many fucking times has he already *tried*?

Naruto shoves him away again, and Sasuke lets him, falling back a few steps. "I hate you," Naruto says in a low voice.

"Good," Sasuke answers bluntly. "Maybe you're starting to understand, then."

"You're such an asshole," Naruto says, and his tone makes a lie out of his previous statement. "You just…*left*, like we were nothing. After we fought with you. And we've spent *years* chasing you, you *bastard*, trying to bring you back, and *look at you*. I don't even recognize you."

Sasuke bites down, hard, on the inside of his cheek. He tastes the blood. "I never asked you to," he says.

"But you did," Naruto says frantically. He shakes his head, sweaty locks flopping into his face. "You risked your life, you – you were willing to *die* for us. Things like that don't just go away because you decide you don't want them anymore."

"You're the one who's holding on to the past, not me," Sasuke tells him, voice harsh. "I let go a long time ago."

"You always tell me how stupid I am," Naruto returns, "but you're the stupid one. How long are you going to let other people manipulate you? Itachi, Orochimaru, Madara. You've never made a single decision that's your own."

He looks Sasuke in the eye. "I used to think I wanted to be like you. I used to think if I could just surpass you, then all my problems would go away. But I never want to be as weak as you are."

Sasuke wants to argue, but he can't. He's always seen himself as a conduit for revenge. If it meant letting others use his abilities, then he learned to accept it. He's never had the same luxury as Naruto – the luxury to choose his own way. His path was decided for him the night Itachi murdered his clan. But Naruto's wrong on one point, and Sasuke finds he can't let it go

uncontested. He can feel this thing between them – this friendship, this rivalry, this endless battle – rushing to a head.

“The Valley of the End,” Sasuke says, and Naruto jerks in surprise. “You asked why I didn’t kill you then. I’ll tell you now.” Naruto goes very still.

“I left you alive *because* it was my decision. Itachi told me to kill you, to become stronger. He had dictated my whole life until then, and I chose not to let him dictate that, too. That’s all.”

Naruto’s eyes are very wide. “Sasuke,” he breathes.

Sasuke hardens his voice. “But that’s over,” he continues. “I have a new purpose now, and as long as you’re in the way, you’re my enemy.”

“You- you did it before,” Naruto says, voice gaining some liveliness. “You just said. You chose before and you can choose again. You don’t have to do this.”

“Move,” Sasuke says simply.

Naruto’s still not done, though. “You moron,” Naruto exclaims. “Why can’t you see that – ”

Sasuke kicks his feet out from under him, and Naruto’s head cracks against the floor of the cave. He’s almost made it past Naruto’s prone form when he feels a hand wrap around his ankle. One mighty heave later and Sasuke’s flying backwards.

Sasuke lands solidly on his feet, but it takes a good five seconds for Naruto to crawl upright again. He’s bleeding from a dozen different places, and he was already weakened from the injury Suigetsu dealt him. If he keeps this up, Sasuke realizes, he won’t have to kill Naruto; Naruto will simply do away with himself.

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu,” Naruto manages, and five clones appear behind him.

Idiot. Sasuke takes them all out at once, hurling shuriken until they poof into nothing.

“Damnit,” Naruto whispers. Sasuke lays the blade against his neck, and Naruto is too tired to even defend himself. His yellow head droops. Every inch of him is streaked with blood and sweat, and Sasuke can tell just by looking at him he’s at his limits.

“Do you understand now?” Sasuke asks him. “This is pointless.”

Everything is silent for a moment. Then Naruto lifts his face. “What I understand,” Naruto says, voice gritty, “is that you’re a stupid, blind, stubborn asshole who wouldn’t recognize real friendship if it bit him in the ass.”

Naruto moves in a flash, drawing himself into a crouched position. He swipes at Sasuke’s legs using the same move Sasuke pulled just minutes ago, but everything else has changed. The desperation is gone from Naruto’s expression, and the air in the cave is suddenly thick with heat and power. His eyes are swirling, the marks on his face have thickened, and Sasuke can see his nails sharpening into claws.

“But I don’t care,” Naruto continues. The fox has definitely begun to take over. Naruto’s voice has deepened to a growl, and his eyes are changing, pulsing. The chakra begins to materialize around him. “I’m not giving up on you.”

Warily, Sasuke maintains the distance between them. Naruto still stands silhouetted against the mouth of the cave, deadly determination on his face. His injuries are healing before Sasuke’s eyes, shrinking into nothing. Sasuke raises his sword, poised.

“Get out of the way,” Sasuke says again, “or I’ll finish what I started at the Valley of the End.”

“No,” Naruto answers, low and resolute. “I won’t let you destroy Konoha, and I won’t let you destroy yourself.”

“You can’t stop me,” Sasuke says. “I’ve proven that time and time again. You’re done, Naruto.”

Naruto’s shoulders bow forward as he clenches his fists. He’s shaking, Sasuke notes, and not from fear. He stays like that for so long that Sasuke wonders if his childhood friend has finally lost it. But no. When Naruto raises his head again, his eyes are even wilder. There’s passion and fire sparking off every inch of him, so palpably fierce that it hurts to witness it. The fox’s chakra is rising slowly around him, and the power of it makes the hair along Sasuke’s arms stand up in awareness.

“No!” Naruto shouts again. “If you want to kill me, then fine! That’s the only way you’re getting out of this cave.”

Sasuke knew it was creeping toward this point, had been for days, probably years. Still, his heart clenches. “All right,” he agrees, voice smooth. “It’s time we ended this anyway.”

The Kyuubi’s chillingly bright chakra is almost audible in the echoing cavern, crackling as it spins faster and faster. So much for keeping a low profile. That chakra would bring every ninja in a twenty-mile radius running. For a detached moment, Sasuke considers letting the fox come out and devour them both. It seems fitting that he and Naruto should both die locked in battle, frozen in place over a war that neither of them started and neither of them can overcome.

Naruto’s eyes flicker red as two translucent tails lash the ground behind him. The fox is using his host’s own rage against him, Sasuke realizes. A few more seconds and there’ll be no turning back. Sasuke will be consumed, and Konoha will go on as it has for four generations, bathing in its bloody peace at Uchiha’s expense. At Itachi’s expense. Sasuke can see that future for a split second, stretching out in front of him. Naruto’s face carved into the mountain. Sakura’s gentle smile. Kakashi’s solid wisdom. A good future. A happy future.

A future that has no place for vengeance, and one that will never come to be.

Sasuke draws his sword back and drives it directly through Naruto’s heart.

Chapter 8, in which there's an extremely unhappy reunion, and everything gets REALLY DRAMATIC

Naruto stumbles backward, and everything in the cave goes deathly silent. The fox's red glow disappears so quickly that Sasuke wonders if he imagined it. The ensuing dust drifts like a fog around them, filtering the dim evening light.

Naruto blinks at him, and Sasuke releases the sword's hilt, stepping back from his slain friend. Skin, muscle, bone, tissue, and skin again. The blade had struck true. Sasuke knows that as long as he lives, he'll never forget the slide of steel through Naruto's body.

"You – " Naruto begins to say, then shudders. He puts both hands on the hilt of the sword, spine curving forward. And then he falls. Slowly, freely, in the most graceful motion Sasuke's ever seen him make, Naruto collapses.

Sasuke catches him before he hits the ground, cradling him as gently as he dares. Naruto's lighter than Sasuke imagined, and Sasuke wonders if the ninja can feels his hands shaking.

"Shit," Naruto says, and his voice is slurred with pain and shock. "You actually – "

"I told you," Sasuke says in a deceptively even voice. "I warned you." He feels a sick pride at his own control.

Naruto's eyes are wide and unfocused, but he manages a fleeting grin at the cave's ceiling. It's ghastly in his colorless face. "You – " he says again, this time with weak humor. " – bastard. Guess I won't be…Hokage after all, eh Sasuke?"

Your fault, Sasuke wants to scream at him, but of course Naruto knows that.

"Idiot," he says instead. Naruto's blood is sinking into the dirt around them, subduing the orange cloth of his tracksuit with frightening rapidity. Sasuke can feel the reedy pulse of his heart fading with each passing second. He coughs, and blood mixes into the air. Every inhale is a battle, and Sasuke knows he has a minute, maybe two.

"Sakura," Naruto says, so faintly that Sasuke has to lean down to hear him. "Tell Sakura-chan…sorry… Make sure…knows…not her fault. Always so…worried."

Sasuke bites his tongue to keep the vows from spilling out. He'll choke before he gives Naruto that much now. Not when Naruto brought this on himself. Naruto's eyelids fall shut, sandy lashes against newly pale cheeks. Sasuke's heart stutters for a second, but Naruto's lips are still moving. "Tell everyone…sorry..."

Sasuke's throat is starting to constrict in something dangerously close to grief. He fights it back. This was destined to happen, he tells himself, from the moment he and Naruto met. This was always going to be the end. So why does he feel like he's dying along with Naruto?

Naruto curls clammy fingers into Sasuke's shirt, and Sasuke catches his wrist, wrapping two fingers over his pulse. "Sasuke," Naruto whispers. "S'okay…that it's you. S'good."

Sasuke wonders if he's going to throw up. "Stop talking, baka," he manages. Naruto's throat works.

"Konoha…" Naruto's bloodless lips are barely moving, but he's still trying to say something. "Not your enemy…promise…"

He puts his hand over Naruto's mouth to stop the labored babbling, not even caring that he might be stealing precious seconds from his friend. He waits for endless moments, watching the chest move in shallow jerks. Naruto's skin is too white, he's lost too much blood, and there's nothing Sasuke can do, nothing he can say, no way he can stop it. He can only suffocate along with Naruto, watching his friend die.

Time ticks by. Twenty-nine seconds, thirty, thirty-one… He keeps counting until he feels Naruto's lips stop moving against his palm. Then Naruto's fingers uncurl and his hand falls.

Sasuke doesn't move for a long time. His teeth are clenched, and he can taste bile in the back of his throat. He eventually eases back, and Naruto rolls to the ground, lifeless. His face is a mess of dirt and blood, and he's so still that Sasuke wants to scream. The sword still protrudes from his chest, marking his heart with perfect accuracy. There's no sound anywhere, like everything on earth simply stopped when Naruto's heart did.

With shaking hands, he puts two fingers against the pulse in Naruto's neck. Nothing. "Naruto," he says raggedly. Nothing. Naruto's skin is already cooling, his mouth is slack, and the blood is beginning to congeal around him. Sasuke's seen a lot of dead bodies in his time, but never one so perfectly, painfully still.

Sasuke drops his head forward, trying to calm his roiling stomach. There's a panic rising in him that he hasn't felt since he stumbled across the dead bodies of his parents when he was a child. It's too soon, and yes, it's his fault and no, this isn't what he wanted and *god*, Naruto still isn't moving.

This can't be the end, he tells himself, trying to breathe. Naruto was just too damn stubborn to die like this, alone and silent in a cave. He was too bullheaded, too epically foolish for such a mundane death. Where were the fireworks, the explosions, the *noise*? This had to be just another stumble along the way for the ninja, another challenge to overcome on the road to the Hokage's seat.

Any second now, he tells himself. *Any second now Naruto will open his eyes and grin. He'll pop up like a jack-in-the-box, babbling about heroes and happy endings and the Way of Ninja. He'll laugh in your face and call you an asshole and tell you it takes more than a sword to kill Uzumaki Naruto. That a stupid Uchiha is no match for the future Hokage, and he'll never be defeated. Never give in. Never just lay there so still and quiet and pale and…*

A choked gasp interrupts the desperate tumble of his thoughts. He turns his head, and Sakura is standing behind him, a hand clutching her stomach like she's been struck. Her green eyes are fastened on Naruto with growing horror.

The chakra. Sasuke realizes dimly. The Kyuubi's chakra must have brought her running. His team can't be far behind. And Naruto is most definitely not getting up.

A cold, familiar knot starts to form in the center of his stomach, and he welcomes it. He wills it to spread over his whole body, like ice on a lake. Numb. Detached. None of this matters, after all. Not really. Konoha is what matters now. Konoha and revenge. Not Naruto's lifeless body, and certainly not Sakura's anguished face.

"Sasuke-kun," she says, choked through with tears. "You – What did you - ?"

He rises to his feet and, with an easy jerk, pulls his sword free of Naruto's body. Naruto doesn't even twitch. Sasuke feels his control returning in maddeningly slow increments, reining in his heart rate as he meets Sakura's gaze with his own blank one.

Sai and Kakashi appear behind Sakura. Neither of them so much as bats an eyelash when they catch sight of Naruto, but Sasuke sees Kakashi's shoulders tense.

"You should keep better control over your team, Kakashi," Sasuke forces himself to say, watching Kakashi's visible eye narrow. "They're too reckless."

The painter looks from Naruto to Sakura to Sasuke, then back to Naruto again. He draws his sword and takes a resolute step toward Sasuke. Sasuke's grip tightens on his own sword, but Kakashi catches the back of Sai's collar at the last minute, restraining.

Sakura sinks to her knees beside Naruto, oblivious to the banked confrontation taking place two feet away from her. There are painful little whimpers ripping from her throat, and Sasuke briefly considers shoving his sword straight through the back of her neck, just to make them stop. She touches Naruto's forehead, then his cheek.

"You killed him," she whispers, without looking up. "He loved you so much, and you killed him." She shakes her head, pink hair flying. "How could you just…?"

Sasuke takes a step toward the mouth of the cave, testing. Kakashi moves to the side, pulling Sai with him and clearing the path for Sasuke's exit. Sasuke takes another step, waiting to see if they'll attack, but Kakashi just watches him. There's no hatred in his face; there's only pity and a withering contempt. Sasuke passes them warily, making sure to keep a hand on his sword.

"Sasuke," Kakashi says at the last moment.

Sasuke looks back over his shoulder.

"We'll bury our dead," Kakashi says evenly. "And then we'll come for you."

Not to bring him back to Konoha. Not anymore. There's no longer any reason. This time, they'll be coming to kill him. Sasuke probes inside himself for the hurt, the sense of loss, and he comes up empty.

"Yes," he says, and he keeps walking.

His composure lasts until he's well into the forest. He puts one foot in front of the other, moving forward aimlessly. There's no need to look for his team. Karin will sense him when he gets close enough, and they'll come to him.

He stops at the first body of water he sees, a narrow stream rushing over rocks and silt, weaving between the trees. The moon is out now, clear and full in the sky, and he leans down absently to wash the cave's dust from his throat.

He meets his own reflection. His chest is covered in dark blood stains, black as pitch under the moonlight. Naruto's blood.

His legs give out like they're made of straw. He crumples to his knees as the grief rushes up in him, covering his vision in darkness. *Naruto*.

Naruto, flicking him in the forehead like a twelve-year-old. *You knocked out two of my teeth, asshole.*

Naruto, clenching his fists. *I'll make it matter.*

Naruto, fingers curling into Sasuke's sides. *I won't let you get away again.*

Naruto, still and bleeding.

Sasuke gags, vomiting up everything he's eaten in the last twenty-four hours, which isn't much. Then he continues to heave until his throat is raw and his stomach is cramped in protest. It doesn't help, though. No matter how thoroughly he empties himself, the guilt and sorrow won't stop pounding at his skull, tearing at his insides, squeezing around every limb.

He remembers how still Naruto had been when Sasuke threatened him at Orochimaru's lair. How silent and strong and unyielding. So different from his stillness in the cave.

Sasuke presses his forehead against the cool grass. Konoha, he reminds himself. Itachi. Betrayal. Revenge.

Naruto, his brain chants.

He's not sure how long he lays there, immobile. The moon drifts overhead, obnoxiously bright and serene.

One down, he thinks dully. One village to go.

End Part II

Part III: Konoha; Chapter 9, in which Sasuke loses what's left of his marbles

“I am so *bored*,” Naruto announces, flopping back dramatically on the leaf-littered ground. “Being dead sucks.”

Sasuke gives him a sidelong glance. “You’re welcome to haunt someone else. I’m sure Sakura’s weeping over your grave as we speak.”

Naruto ignores him. “No girls, no missions, no fighting, no *ramen*.” He sits back up, glaring. “God, even your team is boring. You’d think four people on a vengeance mission would be a little livelier. Where did you *find* these guys?”

“They’re not so bad,” he hears himself say. Sasuke gazes at his team, clustered under the trees a few hundred feet away. He’s been doing that a lot in the last few weeks – distancing himself physically. It cuts down on the likelihood that they’ll catch him talking to thin air.

Even now, Karin is worriedly looking in his direction. Juugo is stretched out on the ground a few yards away, resting, and Suigetsu is polishing his precious sword. He absently tosses the discarded rag over his shoulder, hitting Karin square in the face. She jumps angrily to her feet, and they’re off, arguing loudly and viciously.

“Karin’s pretty hot,” Naruto concedes. “Crazy, but hot. Suigetsu, on the other hand – he’s just crazy. Minus the hot part."

Sasuke watches Karin deliver a kick directly to Suigetsu’s head. Suigetsu explodes into water, and Karin screeches.

“What about Juugo?” Sasuke asks. “Seeing how you almost killed him.”

Naruto shrugs. “He’s okay I guess. I just can’t figure out why he’s following *you*.”

“He thinks I keep his sanity in check.”

Naruto snorts. “Because you’re so sane. Who’s talking to dead people, here?”

“That’s only because you won’t go *away*,” Sasuke says, frustrated.

“Should I go away?”

Sasuke’s head jerks up. Juugo is standing in front of him, face puzzled. He hadn’t even heard the ninja approach. He looks to the side, but Naruto is gone.

Sasuke takes a deep, steadying breath. “What is it?” he asks calmly.

Juugo is fidgeting. That in and of itself is odd. Juugo is always patient, always quiet and deliberate. Except when he's trying to murder them all where they stand, of course.

"I – " he starts, then stops.

Sasuke raises and eyebrow. "Juugo."

Juugo looks to the side. "I haven't known you very long," he says, "and I won't pretend that we're friends. Lately, though…."

Sasuke waits him out, feeling the slow, steady thump of his heart beneath his rib cage. Juugo has patience but Sasuke has more, and he'd rather wait forever than encourage Juugo along this particular conversational path.

Juugo searches Sasuke's face, and when he doesn't get any response, he just comes right out and says it.

"Your brain is somewhere else, Sasuke-kun. And it's been like that since you were taken by the squad from Konoha."

Sasuke studies him, pretending his heart didn't just do a swan dive in his chest. "Is it my ability to lead the team that you're concerned about?" he asks calmly.

"Should I be?" Juugo returns, just as calmly, and Sasuke lets his mouth creep up into a ghost of a smirk.

"Are you sure you still want to do this?" Juugo says, and Sasuke has to struggle to keep the mask on his face.

He switches the Sharingan on like a lamp, hoping it will hide some of his turmoil and possibly distract Juugo at the same time. It partially works. Juugo takes a step back, but he doesn't retreat. Sasuke can see his chakra swirling uncertainly, half-prepared for battle mode.

"Why would you say that?" Sasuke asks coldly.

"I know what you told us," Juugo says. "The jinchuuriki attacked you, you were forced to kill him, then you came and found us. But since then, you've been…"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure that's all that happened? Nothing else?" Juugo asks quietly.

Sasuke can still see Naruto's blood coating his hands whenever the sun starts to set. In every pause, he listens to his own heart and thinks about how Naruto's isn't beating anymore.

"Nothing," he says. His voice doesn't even shake. "Is that what you wanted to ask me?"

Juugo is smarter than most people; he knows when to give up. He reluctantly turns to leave,

then turns back at the last second. “The thing I can’t figure out,” he says, “is why the jinchuuriki would attack you. Because, Sasuke-kun, when we fought him the first time, I could have sworn he was trying to protect you.”

Sasuke’s whole body goes cold. Long after Juugo walks away, he’s frozen, staring at the ground.

“Oh I get it,” Naruto says from beside him. “He’s Kakashi – all sneaky and cryptic and stuff. And Karin is Sakura, if Sakura let the village whore dress her. So does that mean the crazy sword guy is me?”

“He’s not annoying enough to be you,” Sasuke snaps, and Naruto scowls.

*

Sasuke can’t help but wonder if Naruto – the real Naruto – might have been on to something. Because the closer he gets to Konoha, the heavier his stomach feels. Half of it is anticipation. This is it; this is the closure he’s been searching for his entire life. He didn’t get it with Itachi, and he didn’t get it with Madara, but surely, this time…

“You’ll have to kill Sakura, you know,” Naruto tells him. “She’s not like she used to be. She won’t just bow out because it’s you. She’ll fight, and you’ll have to murder her, too. Just like you did me.”

Sasuke’s terminally sick of having this argument, but even dead, Naruto is difficult to ignore. “I’ve made my decision,” Sasuke says stiffly.

Naruto rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah.”

“I *have*,” Sasuke says, annoyed.

“You’re delusional.”

“You’re *dead*,” Sasuke replies. “Act like it.”

“I may be dead, but I’m *still* less delusional than you. How does that feel?”

They travel on the ground to avoid unwanted attention. They’ve been within striking distance of Konoha for weeks now, but Sasuke’s still waiting, waiting, waiting. He’s not sure why he’s stalling. He keeps telling himself it’s to formulate a more solid plan, to give his team enough time to rest, to make sure they’re as prepared as can be.

The truth is, he has the Amaterasu and Konoha doesn’t have a chance. But still he waits, endlessly circling the city, pretending not to notice Suigestsu and Karin exchanging looks behind his back.

Naruto travels in the trees above them, so noisy that Sasuke has to fight back the urge to shush him every couple of miles. A few times he goes to shield Karin from some debris that

Naruto has knocked down, only to realize at the last second that Karin can't be hurt by something that's happening entirely in his mind.

Naruto is particularly talkative at night, when Sasuke's trying to sleep. Sasuke thinks he should be irritated by that but, in truth, it's a relief. Sleep hasn't been his friend for a while, anyway.

"Hey, do you think they gave me lots of awards and stuff for dying in the field?" Naruto asks one night, propped up on an elbow. "Like, maybe they made me Hokage for a day and put my face on the mountain, just because."

"Who would want to look at your face every day?" Sasuke asks.

Naruto pauses, considering that. "Well, in case they did, do me a favor and leave that part intact, okay?"

"It's a little late to ask me for favors, dobe. Exactly which part of my sword going through your heart did you misunderstand?"

"You were my best rival," Naruto says wistfully. "You were the only one who really got it, you know? What it was like growing up alone. What I felt. It's hard to let go, I guess." He smiles sadly. "But you know all about that, right?"

Sasuke wonders if it's normal to feel such conflicting urges to protect and strangle at the same time. Then he remembers which option he chose, and he stops thinking about it altogether.

He watches Naruto sleep next to him, snoring and drooling, and that's what finally lulls him into unconsciousness.

*

Suigestsu is the one who finally confronts him. Of course.

"All right, fearless leader," he says, hands on hips. "I know you're eccentric, or tortured, or whatever, and Karin seems to think it's jerk-off worthy, but to me it's just annoying. Are we fucking attacking or what?"

Sasuke answers his question with the level stare that always makes Karin blush and squirm. Suigetsu just raises his eyebrows impatiently.

"I told you from the beginning," he says. "I'm with you for one reason, and it has nothing to do with Konoha. I'm willing to indulge your little vendetta in the meantime, but can we *get on with it already*?"

"Do you have any better ideas?" Sasuke asks impassively, half-hoping Suigetsu will get irritated enough to challenge him.

But Suigestu just flashes his sharp-toothed grin. "Yes. We attack now. Tonight."

Sasuke surveys the other two members of his team. Karin and Juugo are studiously looking away, but he can feel their attention. They're all in agreement, he realizes. If he stalls for much longer he may have a mutiny on his hands. Getting a new team at this point wouldn't be impossible, but it would be highly, highly inconvenient.

Sasuke looks back at Suigetsu and makes his decision. "Three days. We attack then."

"Finally," Suigetsu mutters, wandering away. Karin's and Juugo's shoulders relax.

"You idiot," Naruto says.

*

His best friend is dead. He killed his best friend. Naruto is gone, vanished, vanquished, silent, done. Over. Sasuke turns it around and around in his mind, and the pieces bounce off each other, never clicking together.

"It's because you feel guilty," Naruto advises him from the other side of the fire. The rest of his teammates are already fast asleep. "You can't believe I'm gone. You feel awful."

"Shut up," Sasuke says. He plays with Naruto's necklace, turning the stone over and over in his palm, wrapping the cord tightly through his fingers. The fire turns it translucent, warm orange glowing through the jade. Everything is slightly blurry, but that's nothing new. His eyesight has been unreliable lately, giving out at the most inconvenient moments. He wonders if he'll still see Naruto when he finally goes blind.

"If you could take it back, you would," Naruto says confidently. "Because seriously – what now, asshole? Admit it – you always thought I'd be around, chasing you. You thought that even after Konoha was gone I'd still be there, trying to drag you back. You were going to live the rest of your life off that fact alone, weren't you?"

"Stop talking."

"Make me," Naruto says, and Sasuke gives him a baleful look. *This is what hell is*, he thinks. *A Naruto who won't stop talking and who can't be punched.*

"Maybe you'd feel better if you had told me before you killed me," Naruto suggests. "How you used to dream about me and Sakura. How hard it was to walk away after the Valley of the End. If I had known, I might have gone about things differently. I might have forgiven you. Hey – you might even be able to forgive yourself."

"I don't need forgiveness," Sasuke says automatically, and Naruto rolls his eyes.

"Right," he says. "That's why you've been walking around talking to yourself for the last month." He scoots closer, peering at Sasuke with bright, curious eyes. "Seriously, you don't look so good," he says.

Sasuke knows that. Sasuke sees his face in every stream they pass, the black circles under blacker pupils, the tense mouth, the hollowing of his cheeks. He looks more like a ghost than the ghost sitting next to him.

“I can’t sleep,” Sasuke confesses in a low voice.

The real Naruto would never have used that brief show of vulnerability against him. Wouldn’t have understood how. The Naruto of his imagination just raises an eyebrow. “Dreams, huh?” he says. “Fighting or,” he lowers his voice suggestively, “fucking?”

When Sasuke doesn’t respond, Naruto makes a disgusted noise. “Jeez, you’re useless. I think your emo is catching. I’m out of here.”

“Wait,” Sasuke says sharply.

But Naruto’s already gone. Sasuke can hear the timbre of his voice hanging in the air like an echo.

Sasuke closes his eyes and, very deliberately, presses blunted nails into his palms until they draw blood. He must be insane, he thinks. It’s not even a good copy of Naruto. The eyes are too knowing, there’s too much malice in the taunts. But it’s the closest thing there will ever be, ever again.

What had the Kyuubi said? *Do not kill Naruto. You will regret it.* That damn fox lied. This, Sasuke thinks bitterly, is not regret. He knows regret. Regret is yelling at Sakura, then seeing the hurt well up in her eyes. Regret is the passing scent of stew in the market, remembering his mother at the stove, and realizing that he’ll never see that kitchen again, never return to that home. Regret is mild, fleeting, mundane.

This is not regret. This is slow, acidic insanity eating away at his psyche. This is the questioning of everything he’s ever done, everything he’s ever been. This is searching inside himself and realizing that there’s nothing there. The last bit of Uchiha Sasuke died with Naruto, and all that remains is this hollow purpose, this task that he doesn’t want, that he *must do*, that he can’t escape from. This is the unending hell of his absolute and sure knowledge that he’ll survive the battle with Konoha. He has no desire to see what’s on the other side.

At least, he thinks darkly, he’s stopped dreaming about Itachi.

*

Sasuke wakes to the touch of steel against his skin.

It’s Suigetsu’s watch, and Sasuke’s eyes dart to the side to see the water ninja propped against a tree, fast asleep. *Idiot*.

Sasuke doesn’t move. “You have a choice,” he says to his unknown attacker, voice rusty with sleep. “You can back down now and escape with your life, or I can kill you.”

“Oh *this* is what déjà vu feels like,” says a familiar voice. “Weird.”

Sasuke inhales sharply. It’s not possible. But he turns his head to the side, just enough to see Naruto holding a kunai against his throat.

“Now,” Naruto continues. “That threat stuff might work on some people, but since you’ve already killed me once…”

Sasuke grabs his wrist, easing the knife away from his neck. Naruto makes no move to fight him, just kneels beside him with raised eyebrows and a smirk on his face. Lightning-quick, Sasuke shoves him to the ground and straddles him, one hand grasping both wrists, another around Naruto’s throat.

“Whoever you are, you can drop the act,” he says through gritted teeth. “You’re not Naruto. Naruto’s dead.”

“What’s wrong?” Naruto taunts. “Can’t possibly believe that the great Uchiha heir might have failed at something? Look all you want, Sasuke. I’m me.”

He could use his Sharingan, but Sasuke’s beginning to realize he doesn’t need to. The look in Naruto’s eyes, the smell of him, the *feel* of him… It’s not a copy. His muscles go rubbery with shock, and Naruto takes the opportunity to ease up on his elbows.

“You should see your face,” Naruto says lightly. “Haven’t you realized it by now? You’re never getting rid of me.”

Sasuke’s hands are shaking. *Is that true*? he thinks desperately, tracing the planes of Naruto’s face with his eyes. *Is that really true*?

He touches Naruto’s cheek with trembling fingers, and Naruto slowly smiles. “Naruto?” he whispers.

Very deliberately, like he's trying to avoid startling him, Naruto leans forward and puts his mouth against Sasuke's chest. Sasuke shudders as arousal ricochets through him. The tanned hands reach up to capture Sasuke’s wrists, and Sasuke doesn’t even think about resisting. He doesn’t want to fight this time, he realizes. He just wants to let Naruto have his way, just revel in Naruto’s aliveness.

Naruto’s hands go around his back, and Sasuke tightens his grip on Naruto’s shoulders. It shouldn’t be this easy; there are things to say and apologies to make. There’s still so much to fight about…

It doesn’t matter. Naruto shoves him gently back, and Sasuke goes with it, gazing up into sky-hued eyes.

“It’s okay,” Naruto says, touching his face. “Just let me.” His blonde head disappears as he turns his attention lower, and a moment later, Sasuke registers the wet warmth of Naruto’s mouth slide around him. He hisses, feeling his heels grinding into the dirt, feeling the crunchy-soft strands of Naruto’s hair drifting through his fingers.

Alive, he keeps telling himself. *Alive, alive, alive. I didn’t kill him. He’s here, and he says he’s not leaving. He says it’s okay, and I believe him. I want to believe him. I need…*

The gentle sucking motions stop. Naruto puts a hand in the center of Sasuke's chest, levering himself upward. Sasuke looks up to see Itachi's face, eyes spinning dangerously above an uncharacteristic smile.

"Hey Sasuke," Itachi says in Naruto's voice. "Wake up."

Sasuke's breath leaves him as the knife slashes across his throat.

*

Sasuke rockets upright, gasping for air. Suigetsu's sitting cross-legged by the fire, and he looks over with mild interest in his pale eyes.

"Sounds like a hell of a dream," he remarks. "Feel like sharing?"

Sasuke puts a hand over his heart, feels it racing at twice the normal speed. The emptiness hits him like a fist, and he barely suppresses the whimper that threatens to break past his lips. He turns away from Suigetsu, laying back down and bringing his knees into his chest to make the awful twisting go away. The fire is crackling steadily at his back, but the shivers won't stop racing through him.

His heart rate slows, but it doesn't stop. It keeps beating in an endless rhythm, counting out the night.

Please, he thinks, closing his eyes. *Make it stop*.

Chapter 10, in which Sasuke makes his choice

The morning of the Konoha attack dawns clear and cool. Sasuke opens his eyes to see Naruto, sitting cross-legged at the foot of his bedroll and staring at him.

“Morning, sunshine,” Naruto chirps. “Big day.”

Sasuke aims a vague kick in his direction, and Naruto vanishes.

The leaves hanging overhead are ringed with red and gold, each outlined in vivid colors against the sky. The gathering sunlight is a perfect, pale spread of yellow, and the grass is bright enough to hurt Sasuke’s eyes. Fall in Konoha has always been beautiful, and today is no exception.

Sasuke barely notices. He washes at the river as the sun rises, breathing in a slow, even pattern and trying to calm his nerves. The water is freezing as it cuts through his hair.

He’d feel better if he had a real plan, he’s sure of it. Since the moment Itachi took his last breath, the end game has been a simple, brutal 'watch Konoha burn.’ Now that it’s here, though, there’s no satisfaction in the thought. He feels empty, and he’s fairly certain he’ll feel even emptier once Konoha is gone. After all, Naruto may be dead already, but there are still pieces of him floating around in that village – his old bedroom and Sakura’s young eyes and Kakashi’s gentle guidance. There are still a few things left to lose, and Sasuke makes himself catalogue them one by one as he drags the moist cloth against the back of his neck.

He takes his time washing, letting the memories slip through his brain. None of them linger long enough to dig their claws in – just long enough for Sasuke to get a hazy glimpse, and then let go. He never thought he’d feel so much loss, standing outside his childhood home for the final time. He’s not sure how long he spends in the river, but it feels like hours. It feels like a lifetime. When he’s finally done, when the past has stopped running a picture show in his head, he turns to head back to camp.

Naruto is leaning against a nearby tree, watching him in silence.

“What?” Sasuke snarks. “No more witty comments? Did you finally get tired of hearing your own voice?”

“Did you finally get tired of being a prick?” Naruto shoots back, and as an insult it’s so lame and so *Naruto* that Sasuke wants to laugh. Maybe his brain is better at this hallucination business than he thought.

“We’re still attacking today,” Sasuke informs his delusion. “Don’t try and talk me out of it.” Naruto looks surprised. By what, Sasuke can’t even begin to imagine.

“So that’s it?” Naruto says finally. “Three old farts made a mistake twenty years ago, so you’re going to slaughter a village full of innocent people? Is that how you want the Uchiha name to go out?”

“A mistake?” Sasuke says incredulously, because not even Naruto could be *that* stupid. “You call slaughtering my family,*ruining* my *life*, a mistake?”

Naruto just blinks at him, maddeningly.

“Konoha’s peace was not worth Itachi’s life,” Sasuke sneers. “The only *mistake* they made was leaving me alive to find out the truth, and that mistake will come back to destroy them.” His blood is starting to twist through his veins now, quick and sleek as a serpent. He’s been hesitating for too long. The only person on earth who could have stopped him is gone, and this isn’t something he can put off for even one more day. He’s said his goodbyes – it’s time.

Naruto watches him for another moment, then shrugs away from the tree. “Oh well,” he says. “It doesn’t matter. Either way, it won’t work. I’m going to stop it.”

“By annoying me to death?” Sasuke mutters. Naruto just stands there, looking so strong and warm and fucking guiltless that Sasuke longs to punch him.

“Besides,” Naruto says with a little smile. “You’re back in Konoha, so I’m already up one point. I told you I’d bring you back here someday, didn’t I?”

And what the hell, Sasuke thinks. It’s his goddamn delusion and he’ll punch it if he wants to.

He hits Naruto square in the jaw, expecting to meet air, or maybe the tree behind him. Instead, his fist connects solidly with skin and bone, sending Naruto stumbling back into the bark with a thunk.

Sasuke is so shocked that he’s the one who falls down.

“What the *hell*?” Naruto yells, holding his face. He turns sparking blue eyes on Sasuke. “First you kill me, then you *hit me*? What the hell is *wrong* with you?”

Sasuke stares up at him, dumbfounded. *Not possible*, he thinks faintly. It has to be a trick, or an illusion. Kakashi? No. Not Kakashi’s style. When Kakashi came for him, he’d attack face to face, and he’d attack straightforwardly. He’d come with deadly force, but he wouldn’t play mind games like this. He wasn’t Itachi.

Sasuke looks around wildly, but there’s nothing. His Sharingan, his stupid, cursed Uchiha eyes can see everything, and all they see now is Naruto, buoyant and brash and spastic and *alive*. He can recognize Naruto’s chakra, powerful and unmistakable, even without the Kyuubi behind it.

Kyuubi. Sasuke narrows his eyes, probing. He can see the fox seething impatiently in its shadowed prison, safely locked away for the moment. Sasuke steps up to it, nose to gigantic nose, human to demon.

“What are you?” he asks flatly.

The fox laughs at him, a sly, malicious rumble. “Thought you killed him, did you? Stupid, weak human. As though I’d let you.”

His heart stopped, Sasuke thinks desperately. *I felt it. He died, I killed him, he’s dead, he –*

The Kyuubi bares his teeth and hisses. “You think to harness me. You think to control me. His life ends when I say, not when you decide.”

Sasuke feels the rage rise up in him. “Naruto’s life,” he says coldly, “is not yours.”

The fox clucks. “Jealous human. You lack the power of the other Uchiha. You’re worthless against me.”

Sasuke narrows his eyes. “This time, I’m finished with you,” he says. He puts his hand out, laying his fingers against the frothing form of the demon. The aura blows away like dust.

He takes a step back, and he’s on his knees in front of Naruto, staring up.

“How?” he asks, shaken. His hands fist in the grass. “I saw – I *felt* – you die. How are you alive?”

“Not so easy to kill, am I?” Naruto says smugly.

“The nine-tailed fox?” Sasuke asks.

Naruto looks down. “The fox…and Sakura-chan,” he says in a low voice. “She used so much chakra trying to heal me that she almost put herself in a coma. She was in the hospital for weeks.” Naruto looks him in the eye, uncharacteristically grim. “I owe you for that.”

Naruto stretches a hand down and pulls him to his feet. His head is spinning. Sakura, in the hospital. And Naruto...alive. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to be feeling right now, but he’s pretty sure it’s not this elation that’s rolling through him. He feels light-headed at the sight of Naruto’s face.

He can’t help it; he puts his hands on him, touching his shoulders. Naruto jerks warily, but Sasuke holds him in place so he can look at him. He lays his palm against Naruto’s warm chest, feels the steady thump of his heart underneath. His fingers curl into the cloth of Naruto’s shirt, and he closes his eyes briefly against the emotions assaulting him.

He forces himself to be still. He waits. He concentrates on Naruto’s face, not breathing. Usually, this is when he wakes up. If Naruto’s going to disappear, this is when it will happen. Any moment now.

He slides a palm over Naruto’s collarbone, focusing on his steady pulse. Naruto stiffens as Sasuke’s other hand follows suit of its own volition, and Sasuke realizes too late that both his hands are around Naruto’s neck.

Naruto’s voice is as cool as Sasuke’s ever heard it when he says, “I thought you’d at least apologize before you tried again.”

He doesn’t realize he’s falling until Naruto catches him, both arms going around his back. He drops his forehead against the base of Naruto’s throat and shudders, overwhelmed by the relief coursing through him. “Idiot,” he says, muffled. “Of course you’re too stubborn to die.”

Naruto is still and uncertain against him, and Sasuke figures what’s worth saying once is worth repeating. “Idiot,” he says again. “Moron. Loser. Stupid,
stubborn, *annoying*, *obnoxious* – ” Naruto doesn’t disappear. He stands stays there, warm and breathing and alive alive alive, and Sasuke doesn’t know how this could be happening, but he’s starting to realize it truly is.

After endless seconds he feels Naruto's hands move, one set of fingers hesitantly brushing the hair at Sasuke's nape, the other touching the moisture rapidly spreading on the front of his own shirt. "Sasuke," he says wonderingly. "Are you – ?"

He gives Naruto a rough shake to shut him up, then pushes away. "Be quiet," Sasuke orders unsteadily. "Just shut up for once." He scrubs the tears from his face, trying to force the air back into his lungs. "Fuck," he whispers at the ground.

Where the hell was his composure, his pride, his fucking dignity? He wants to tip his head back and laugh and laugh and laugh, because in all his life, for all his victories and all the battles he's won, he's never been happy until this moment.

Naruto's face is starting to change. "You really felt guilty," he says, delighted. "Look at you. You're falling apart. I'll remember this next time you call me weak, asshole."

Sasuke shoves him without much heat, and Naruto just goes with it, falling back against the tree again. "I'm just pissed I still have to listen to you yammer," Sasuke lies. The sarcasm doesn't quite hide the ragged relief in his voice, though. Naruto just grins like the fox he is.

Sasuke doesn't know whether he wants to hug Naruto again or jam a kunai through his shoulder in payback for the last month of hell, for not coming after him *immediately* and demanding retribution or payback or *something*.

"You," Sasuke says shakily, "are such an idiot. What are you doing out here all by yourself?"

Naruto's face takes on a guilty cast. He looks like a little kid caught with his hand in the candy jar. "Sakura-chan would kill me," he says, rubbing the back of his head with one hand. "But they've been tracking your team for weeks." He scowls at Sasuke's black cloak. "I can't believe you're still wearing that," he says. "They almost sent an ANBU squad to take you out."

"It wouldn't have worked, anyway," Sasuke says, and Naruto grins again.

"That's what I told them." He clears his throat. "I don't suppose you'd consider *not* attacking Konoha?"

"No," Sasuke says, and he means it. But it's not accompanied by the cold flash of rage that's been his constant companion for so long. Naruto is alive, and that fact alone is like a protective sphere around him. The warmth inside of him can't escape, and nothing bad can get in to poison it.

Naruto's mouth tightens slightly. "Of course not."

"You should probably try to kill me now," Sasuke offers, figuring he owes Naruto at least that much. "It's your best chance to stop it."

Naruto looks away. "I know." He doesn't need to say, *But I won't*. He doesn't need to say, *I would never* or *I don't hurt the people I love*. Sasuke hears it loud and clear. It makes his blood sing.

“So,” Sasuke says.

“So,” Naruto answers. “I guess I’ll see you there.” He takes a step back, and then he’s gone, nothing but drifting smoke in his place.

Sasuke stares up at the sky for a long time. He sees it all, suddenly – the brightness of the sun and the beauty of the leaves and the clear sparkle of the stream. Everything is very peaceful and quiet, and he thinks about how different it will be in a few hours time, when Konoha is in flames. And he makes his decision.

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An hour has passed when he finally arrives back at camp.

“By all means, take your time,” Suigetsu says sarcastically, and Karin slaps him across the back of the head.

“Is everything okay?” she asks cautiously, stepping closer. “You look…weird.”

“Fine,” Sasuke says serenely “Are you ready?”

“Hell yes,” Suigetsu says, getting to his feet. “I’ve been waiting forever for some payback. That kunoichi bitch almost took my head off the first time. I can’t wait to – ”

He freezes as Sasuke’s blade slides inches from his throat, the barest whisper of a threat. “You won’t touch Sakura,” Sasuke says pleasantly.

Suigetsu’s expression is somewhere between confusion and wariness, Karin’s is fascination tinged with jealousy, and Juugo’s is as calm and opaque as ever.

And then, because he has *some* pride left, Sasuke adds, “Or anyone else. Change of plans.”

Suigetsu inches away, face disgruntled. “You could have just said so,” he mutters.

“You three guard the main tower,” Sasuke says. “No one goes in or out except me. I’m going after the elders.”

Karin’s brow furrows. “But I thought – ”

“I changed my mind,” Sasuke says. “You can wound, but don’t kill. Is that clear?”

Suigetsu shrugs, still sulky. “Won’t be too difficult, anyway. With fox-boy gone – ”

“Naruto is alive,” Sasuke interjects calmly, and they all look at him again.

“One last thing,” he continues. “They know we’re coming.”

The silence stretches until Juugo clears his throat. “Well,” he says. “Shall we?”

His team scatters at the border of the security barrier, and Sasuke heads for the Hokage’s tower. He leaps from building to building, feeling the flex of his feet as he springs over the

rooftops. His body is wound like a coil, but he's not nervous– he's fucking euphoric. He's headed toward the most important battle of his life, and he feels light, light, lighter than he's ever felt. Even his heart is tripping along with half its usual weight, propelling him through the air until he's flying over the Hokage's roof.

He lands in a graceful crouch in the center of the office, then stops in his tracks.

They're all standing there – Kakashi with both eyes exposed, Sakura looking pale and grave in her hospital scrubs, Sai, Iruka, the one Sakura called Yamato, Tsunade, Guy, and the assorted jounin and chuunin of the village. They're backed by a line of ANBU, each staring him down from behind his or her blank mask.

At the center of it all stands Naruto, planted firmly between Sasuke and the three Konoha elders.

Sasuke lifts his sword and prepares himself for his final battle.

Chapter 11, in which Tsunade pwns and Konoha gets a surprise visitor

Sasuke surveys the room. The threads from his past face him in a semi-circle, and Sasuke feels dozens of eyes on him, all narrowed, all hostile.

“End of the line, kid,” the Hokage says. Her arms are crossed in a deceptively relaxed stance, but Sasuke isn’t fooled. His Sharingan can pick up Tsunade’s gathering chakra, and the sure, calm power of it has his fingers twitching.

“I’d think long and hard before you make your next move,” she continues.

Naruto is protecting the elders – that’s certain. But everyone else… They’re here for Naruto, he realizes. It’s in their directed stance, in the way their eyes keep darting between Naruto and Sasuke. Somehow, when Sasuke wasn’t looking, Naruto had achieved his dream; he’d gotten the whole village to acknowledge him.

More than just acknowledge, judging by the warriors assembled around him. All of them would kill Sasuke given half a chance – the Cain, the deserter, the one who murdered his best friend.

Sasuke feels the prickle of power dance along his nerve endings. He could kill them all; one by one or in a single lightning strike from above. He’s too fast, he’s too skilled, his eyes are too powerful. He could take out the heart of Konoha right here, and the rest would crumble all by itself. He can almost hear Orochimaru whispering tactics in his ear, showing him how to go about it, orchestrating his victory. His heart rate begins to speed up.

He fights it back down. He can’t kill them all without killing Naruto, too, and he can’t go through that again. His whole body rebels at the thought. He’s been living with the dead his entire life, but this is somehow different. Naruto died too, but somehow, against all odds, Naruto came back. Sasuke *got* Naruto *back*, and he can’t fathom testing fate by killing Naruto again. It might stick this time, and even the thought is enough to rip the last of the sanity from Sasuke’s brain.

He tries reasoning first, ignoring Tsunade and speaking directly to Naruto. “You know why I’m doing this,” he says. He infuses some warning into his tone. “You know what they did to my family. This is my right, Naruto.”

“That’s horseshit,” Naruto says bluntly, and Sasuke casts desperately around for what to say next. He’s lived his whole life simply taking what he wanted by force, powering through by violence or intelligence or, when those failed him, pure arrogance. He has none of that now.

He goes with bluffing. “You’ll have to kill me to stop me. I’d rather die than back down,” he tries, and he’s not sure why that would work on Naruto when Naruto practically invented the concept, but he’s willing to attempt anything at this point.

Naruto's face is patently disbelieving. "I don't think so," he says. "That doesn't sound like you."

The Konoha forces are creeping in around him, taking cautious steps toward him like he's a ticking time bomb. Danzou is proud and stiff behind Naruto, and his two cronies are shrinking back against the wall like they can sink through it and disappear.

Except Naruto. Naruto stays still, watching him out of calm blue eyes.

Sasuke takes a step forward, and the whole room tenses in unison. "Don't make me do this," he threatens. "Turn the elders over and I won't be forced to hurt anyone else."

"I'm not making you do anything," Naruto says, voice mild. "You can take credit for this one all by yourself."

"You don't know how important this is," Sasuke pushes on. "You don't know, you have no *concept* – "

"I think you've mentioned it once or twice," Naruto says dryly. "Trust me – I get it by now."

He takes a step in another direction, and Naruto mirrors him, shortening the distance between them. Sasuke's jaw tightens. His eyes flicker again to the elders behind him, wildly calculating. There has to be something he can do. There has to be some way to get to them without putting Naruto in the crossfire. The Amaterasu is useless here; he can't be sure that he won't burn the whole tower to the ground, and Naruto with it.

But his end game is *right there*, and he's come so far… Itachi's memory, his parents' faces, Madara's painful, gutting voice – they're all shoving at his back, pushing him forward.

Tsunade's calm voice breaks in. "As far as I'm concerned, you're still a part of this village. I don't deny that you have reasons to be angry. But if you take another step we *will* defend ourselves, and we won't hold back."

Her arms aren't crossed anymore. They're at her sides, loose. Ready.

Sasuke grips his sword, clutching simultaneously for his resolve. "I know you don't want to fight me again," he tells Naruto. "We've already seen the outcome."

There's a flicker of something old and remembered in Naruto's eyes – a spark of challenge that Sasuke would recognize anywhere. It disappears quickly, though, replaced by something deeper. Knowing.

"You know what I think?" Naruto says. "I think you're the one who doesn't want to fight. What are you waiting for, Sasuke?" Sasuke stares at him in mute frustration. "You told me once that in order to win you have to be ready to kill," Naruto continues softly. "Well?"

Sasuke doesn't make the mistake of lying. His mouth feels dry as cotton. "Please," he says hoarsely, and he doesn't think he's ever pleaded in his life, but he has no choice. He can't kill Naruto – not again – and Naruto is the one thing standing between him and the task he was born to do.

“Please, Naruto,” he says again, hearing his own desperation. “You don’t understand. I have to do it. I need – ”

“No,” Naruto says gently, and his eyes are a perfect, cloudless blue. “You don’t. It’s over – let it die. It’s time to put it behind you. We’ll help you.” He sounds so sure – he sounds like someone who knows he’s already won – and Sasuke feels all his plans, all his intentions, all his resolve slipping off of that smooth tone.

He bows his head. In his mind, Itachi is dying over and over again, his life wasted, his family gone, his eyes slowly blinding him. And every time, he’s smiling.

He can sense Naruto stepping closer. His Sharingan has melted away, and his sword is creeping downward inch by inch, useless against Naruto’s calm confidence, his relentless determination.

Sasuke wants to howl. He wants to throw fists and kick through doors and pound the floor like a toddler. All of Konoha is watching and he’s begging. These are his enemies, and he’s *pleading* in front of them. And the worst part is that it’s *still* better than when he thought Naruto was gone.

“I’d rather you kill me,” he says in a low voice, so only Naruto can hear. “Don’t do…this. It has to end – it should be you.”

He sees Naruto’s shoulders lift once in a shrug. “You’ve always been the pessimist,” he says. “Not me.”

Naruto stops right in front of him, but Sasuke doesn’t look up. He should feel humiliated – he should feel *angry* – but all he feels is despair. The point of his sword hits the ground, and something in his chest unravels painfully.

“Sai,” Danzou orders immediately. Sasuke can hear the mingled anger and relief in the old man’s clipped tone, and he silently, helplessly hates him.

Sai draws his sword but he doesn’t move. Instead, very calmly, he looks to Naruto. Naruto gives his head a small shake, and Sai stays put.

When Naruto becomes Hokage, Sasuke thinks distantly, *at least he won’t have any trouble finding a bodyguard*.

Naruto lays a hand on his shoulder, and Sasuke closes his eyes. “This is better, Sasuke, I swear,” Naruto says.

“How do you know that?” Sasuke mumbles.

“I’m me,” Naruto says. “I know. Okay?”

Sasuke takes a deep breath. He lets his fingers go limp, and his sword clatters to the ground.

He can see the tension leaving Kakashi’s shoulders from all the way across the room, and Sakura’s face is almost boneless with relief. Even Iruka is smiling slightly, and the academy

teacher touches Sakura's shoulder reassuringly. Tsunade is still inscrutable, but she makes a motion that has two ANBU operatives approaching him carefully from either side. Sasuke stands still, letting them come. Naruto's hand is very warm on his shoulder, but Sasuke can't bring himself to look up .

The first ANBU member has just lifted his wrists to put the cuffs on when a new voice interrupts.

"Well," a new voice says. "This is surprising."

Sasuke spins to see Madara propped against the Hokage's desk. His arms are crossed nonchalantly over his chest, and his mask is in place.

Sasuke stands, staring. For a moment, he's afraid he's seeing ghosts again. Madara. Madara *here*, in Konoha. Had Madara been following his team this whole time, waiting for them to attack? Or was this just a lucky coincidence? Was the Uchiha here for the Kyuubi, or did he have some other plan in mind?

And how the *hell* had he crept into a room full of veteran shinobi unnoticed?

Naruto's face immediately registers recognition. "You," Naruto exclaims, pointing. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

Madara ignores him. "I thought Konoha would be begging you for mercy by now, Sasuke-kun – not putting you in chains." He sighs. "It seems the Uchiha blood has thinned significantly over the years. Your parents would be so disappointed."

Sasuke's stands, frozen against the lash of those words.

Madara stands. "Oh well," he says, shrugging. "I guess I'll have to do it myself." He begins to reach into his pouch.

Sasuke feels, rather than sees, Kakashi move. One moment his sensei is beside Sakura, the next he's behind Madara, reaching…

Kakashi's Chidori passes right through the image.

"That was close," Madara says from across the room. "My compliments." Sasuke's head jerks toward the sound. Madara had moved in an instant, so fast that even the Sharingan hadn't caught it.

"Something tells me I may need both eyes for this," Madara says, and he begins to ease off the swirling mask. Sasuke tenses, half-expecting the heaviness of the Mangekyo to form in his eyes again without his permission. It doesn't happen this time, though.

Madara's face is smooth and unlined – a perfect symmetry of dark hair and red eyes and delicate Uchiha bones. It's like looking at an amalgam of the faces of his entire family put together, and Sasuke feels like throwing up.

The older generation of Konoha is staring in shocked recognition. "How…" Tsunade starts.

Naruto interrupts her. “What the hell is going on?” he says. “Who are you, and why are you talking to Sasuke like that?”

He takes a step toward the older Uchiha, and suddenly Sasuke regains use of his limbs. He grabs Naruto’s arm. “Careful. He’s here for you,” he cautions. “That’s Madara.”

Naruto jerks, and he turns to Sasuke, eyes wide with betrayal. “Did you…” he starts.

The look on his face has the bile rising in Sasuke’s stomach, but he pushes it back in favor of more pressing concerns. “Not me, stupid,” he hisses. “Like I give a shit about your demon. I told you why I was here.”

“Don’t call me stupid, *stupid*,” Naruto returns hotly. “Excuse me for jumping to conclusions, but you already *killed* me once this month.”

“I’m pretty sure you deserved it,” Sasuke mutters, and Naruto bristles. He turns his entire back on Madara to grab Sasuke’s collar.

“Listen you,” he starts.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Madara cuts in politely. “But I’ve been waiting a long time for this. If you’d prefer not to start, then I will.”

Two shuriken spin on his fingers, and Sasuke tenses, waiting to see which way the Uchiha will attack. His ancestor’s eyes never leave his.

Sasuke begins to move, to put himself between Naruto and Madara, when a sudden whistling sound stops him. Sasuke looks again, and the shuriken are gone from Madara’s fingers. Vanished. The room stands in shocked silence.

Then a gurgled moan leaks out. Iruka lurches forward, the two steel weapons embedded in his throat. He hits the ground with a sickening thud.

All hell breaks loose.

The shinobi around Sasuke propel themselves into battle in sync, grief and rage written on every face. Only Naruto is frozen, staring at the body of the man he once told Sasuke that he thought of as a father. Sasuke can tell from clear across the room that it’s already too late. Iruka’s gentle eyes stare upward, open and caught in a startled expression, and blood leaks down his vest.

“No,” Naruto says through bloodless lips. Then, “No!”

He rushes at Iruka, face white. Kakashi makes a move to restrain him, but Naruto brushes the jounin aside like a fly. Sasuke stands, torn, staring at the spot Naruto vacated.

The elders are unprotected, Orochimaru murmurs in his subconscious. *Now’s your chance*. Danzou meets Sasuke’s eyes in a haughty stare, not giving an inch.

Sasuke grits his teeth and starts toward Naruto instead. Five fingers immediately catch his arm in an iron grip and yank him back. “Don’t even think about it, you little shit,” Tsunade growls. “If you want to be alive when this is over, you fight.”

“Let me go,” Sasuke says. He glances over at Naruto again, then at the Fifth. She stares him down, her hand tightening on his arm with painful strength.

“He doesn’t like attacks from above,” Sasuke says finally. “And avoid his eyes. They’re not as good as Itachi’s, but they’re better than mine.” Tsunade’s jaw relaxes, and she nods curtly.

“Good,” she says. “Now go.” She shoves him toward the center of the fray, where Madara is seemingly effortlessly fending off attacks from five different directions at once. Sasuke lets himself look back one more time, where Naruto and Sakura are hunched over Iruka’s body. He turns away and leaps into action.

Chapter 12, in which Sasuke saves the day. A lot.

Madara is an Uchiha, all right.

That's the thought that keeps floating around in Sasuke's brain as he does his best to keep himself from getting killed.

The Konoha shinobi have all been trained to avoid the Sharingan, but it gives them distinct disadvantages against their opponent. It gives them blind spots, makes them slower, and they can't afford even those small weaknesses against Madara.

He moves like the ghost that he really should be by now, and he's seemingly impervious to every attack that comes his way. Sai comes close once, sword aimed and dark eyes focused. Madara catches the blade at the last second, though, shoving Sai off like he weighs nothing.

The sound of the window cracking against the painter's back proves differently. Sai's black-clad figure goes rolling onto the roof and over the edge. Sasuke tries not to think about how far it is to the ground.

Behind it all, Sasuke can hear Naruto's voice. "Iruka," Naruto is saying, over and over again, shaking his sensei's shoulders. "Come on, please. *Iruka*."

Sasuke dodges and parries, flings Chidori and breathes fire and watches Madara cut down an unknown ANBU. He's starting to regret leaving his team outside. When he finally manages to steal a glance, it's to see Tsunade gently closing Iruka's eyes and Naruto on his knees, arms clutching his stomach. There are tears coating both cheeks.

"I'll kill him," he hears Naruto choke. "I will fucking kill him."

"Naruto, wait," Sakura calls, but it's too late. Naruto's on his feet already, pushing through the crowd to reach Madara. The Konoha forces take one look at his face and practically scramble to get out of his way.

Naruto catches the shuriken Madara throws in one hand and hurls it back. His aim is wild, and the weapon finds the wall. "I'm going to kill you," Naruto promises, deep and heavy with rage, and Madara smiles. Someone else starts to attack from the right, and Naruto holds them off without looking.

"No," he says. "He's mine."

He's already encased in the fox's chakra, three tails curling threateningly behind him. His shoulders are curved forward, claws at the ready. He's focused and deadly, and Sasuke is naïve enough to feel a second of relief. Nothing can hurt Naruto when he's like this.

Then Madara speaks again and Sasuke's blood runs cold.

"You have no idea how happy I am to here that," Madara says, and Naruto growls.

“Enjoy it while you can,” he says, and launches himself at Madara. Another tail materializes, and the air in the tower gets even more oppressive.

Madara slides gracefully out of range of Naruto’s attack, and Naruto actually *picks up the desk*and throws it at him. Ninja scatter as the heavy piece of furniture plows into the wall. Naruto tenses, ready to spring again. He’s on all fours, and he’s never looked more like a demon. His eyes are glowing red and the chakra is whipping visibly around him. Sasuke hears Tsunade cursing in a long, steady stream.

“Naruto.” Sakura appears at Naruto’s side, laying tentative fingers on his arm. Sasuke suddenly remembers an uninvited hug from years ago, Sakura’s arms tight and pleading around him.

“Calm down,” she says. Her voice is composed, but Sasuke can hear the fear lurking underneath. “Try to see. This isn’t the – ”

Naruto shoves her away with shocking violence, and Sakura goes skidding across the floor, holding her shoulder.

“Yamato,” Kakashi says, sharp with alarm.

“I know, I know.” The helmeted captain is sweating with effort, dark eyes focused with laser intensity on Naruto. Snake-like arms shoot from the ground toward Naruto’s pulsing red figure, with the intent of doing god-knows what. Whatever it is, it’s not working. The long, boxy weapons burn up the moment they hit the line of chakra.

Yamato grabs his chest suddenly and falls to all fours with grunt. “It’s not going to work,” he says, low and defeated. His mouth is strained. “I’m sorry, Kakashi-san. He must be too far gone.”

Sasuke feels the wind as Kakashi runs by him, determinedly headed toward Naruto. His sensei stops, just feet from where the pulsating ball of rage and chakra is facing off with Madara.

“Naruto,” he says, in the stern, commanding voice Sasuke remembers from his training days. Naruto’s eyes barely flick in his direction. “Focus,” Kakashi orders. “You can overcome this. Giving in here will only get your comrades killed.”

Naruto is shaking, and for a moment it almost seems that Kakashi’s words are penetrating. Kakashi takes a cautious step closer, and Naruto reacts, slashing out with deadly, curved claws. Blood splashes on floor as Kakashi collapses, gored straight up the middle.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Sasuke registers Sakura’s scream. He can’t tear his eyes away from Madara’s face, though. Madara looks…delighted, like he tore open the wrapping paper expecting one thing, and found something even better inside.

This was his plan all along, Sasuke realizes. Incite Naruto to such a degree that the fox comes out right in the middle of Konoha. He’s been waiting years for revenge, and he intends to

have it right here. Sasuke's not sure if the choice of Iruka as victim was the result of careful planning or just a lucky coincidence, but Madara couldn't have picked a better person.

Tsunade yells out an order, and the Konoha forces cautiously begin to move in again, this time with added task of avoiding Naruto's wrath. Sasuke can plainly see that it's no good. Anyone who steps between Naruto and Madara is simply swept aside. Naruto is doing more damage than good.

He looks over to see Sakura grasping Kakashi by the vest, trying desperately to pull his dead weight off to the side. For a moment, Sasuke can't figure out why someone with her strength would be having such trouble, but then he remembers that Naruto's words about her stint in the hospital. She must still be recovering from healing the damage to Naruto's body. Fixing Sasuke's mistakes.

In her panic, she turns her back on the battle for a second, leaving herself wide open to attack. Madara doesn't look at Sakura – he looks at Sasuke. There's a gleam in his eye, and Sasuke realizes what he's going to do a split second too late.

Sasuke doesn't even feel himself move. One moment he's on his feet, the next he's crouched over Sakura, a half dozen shuriken and knives decorating his back in a rainbow of sharp agony. Most of them are shallow wounds, but Sasuke feels one deadly blade embedded between his ribs, burning urgently. Close to his heart. Too close.

Sakura, however, is untouched.

She stares up at him, shocked. "Sasuke-kun?" she says faintly. Her eyes are wide, and his blood is hitting her clothing, and her expression is almost enough to make up for the way she looked at him when she saw Naruto's body in the cave. But there's no time to think about that now.

"Go," he grits. "Get him away." Kakashi's face is ashen, but he's still breathing.

Sakura touches his cheek, and there are deep shadows under her eyes. "I'll come back for you," she says, and then she drags Kakashi away.

Sasuke can feel his insides leaking. The battle rages on behind him, but he barely hears it. The wooden floor feels like a feather bed when his face hits it, and Sasuke's pretty sure that's a bad sign. This was not how he intended to die, with the elders still alive and Madara attacking Naruto, and absolutely nothing at all accomplished, but it seems he doesn't have a choice in the matter.

He vaguely feels himself being dragged along, the wood chafing his skin, and Sakura's tearful *Shishou, here, hurry!* slides fuzzily through in his brain.

Sasuke's lifted and rolled, and then he's staring at the blurry ceiling as the Hokage leans over him. "You, Uchiha, are way more trouble than you're worth," Tsunade growls. She puts her hands over him, mouth tight.

It takes a few seconds, but the agony starts to recede and his vision comes back into focus. Two pairs of hands ease him into a sitting position, and Sasuke holds his temples, trying to get his bearings.

“What did you do?” he asks Tsunade in a low voice.

“You’re patched, not fixed,” she says sternly. “Try not to die before we can get you into a real hospital.”

He can't quite bring himself to say thank you. The combination of pride and Tsunade's ferocious frown makes his tongue stick.

Her expression isn't for him, though. “Look,” she says.

It’s not even Naruto anymore. His face has lengthened into the fox’s, and he seems to have grown three times in size. Swirling red eyes scour the room, looking for something to attack. The tails sway in the background, creating a wind of havoc in the tower. Furniture goes crashing through the windows.

“This is bad,” Tsunade murmurs. Her eyes are on Naruto, but her words are for Sasuke. “Six tails. He’s never gone beyond four before. He gets to nine, and the seal will be broken. We’re right in the middle of the village. If the Kyuubi truly gets out, we’re all dead.”

“And Naruto?” Sasuke asks in dread.

She shakes her head. “There won’t be any more Naruto.”

“Tell me,” Sasuke orders. “How do we stop it?”

“You’re the one with the eyes, kid.”

Sasuke’s fists clench involuntarily. Madara’s Mangekyo is whirling in his face, and Sasuke knows what his ancestor is doing. He’s trying to get through to the fox, fighting with Naruto for control of the demon. From the looks of it, Madara is winning.

He stands in front of Naruto, no longer moving, just focusing the force of his eyes on the boy-fox hybrid in front of him. Naruto sways on all fours, caught. The other warriors hover uncertainly.

Shit, shit, shit.

“I’m going,” Sasuke says. “Keep everyone away from Naruto and Madara. Don’t let anyone else risk their life. If he comes back from this, he’s going to be pissed enough at himself as it is.”

“When,” Sakura says suddenly, muffled. “When he comes back.” Sasuke knows she can’t bear to think anything else.

“When,” he agrees.

She grabs his shoulder at the last second. “You too,” she says.

And Sasuke can’t promise that, but he nods anyway. It’s the least of what he owes her.

He approaches Naruto from the side, trying to figure out how to make eye contact without getting too close to Madara. He skirts around Naruto’s pulsing form, looking for a way in.

Naruto won’t look at him, trapped in Madara’s Mangekyo.

Fine.

Sasuke punches him directly across the jaw, and Naruto’s Kyuubi form turns with a snarl. Sasuke activates his own Mangekyo, connecting with Naruto’s darkened irises. He takes a deep breath and steps inside of Naruto’s mind.

The first thing that Sasuke feels is the heat. It’s hideously, swelteringly hot. It hits him like a brick wall, like a tangible thing. He wonders when the tower caught on fire.

Then he realizes it’s not a real fire at all. It’s coming from the fox.

It takes Sasuke a few seconds to figure out why. The Kyuubi isn’t speaking, or moving, or mocking, or doing anything Sasuke has associated with it in the past. It’s just crouched there, vibrating with a silent rage that Sasuke can feel from all the way across the room. The bars seem to be wavering, bending.

Madara is standing inches away from the cage, and Naruto is curled inside at the fox’s feet.

“Sasuke-kun,” Madara says without looking. “Welcome. I had a feeling you might try this.”

Half of Sasuke’s mind is still in the Hokage’s tower, listening to Tsunade barking orders. Madara’s words are coming at him from the realms of reality and illusion alike, and it makes him dizzy.

Or maybe that’s just the Mangekyo.

Sasuke can feel the blood trickling down his cheeks, can already feel the burning pressure beginning.

“I’m not here for the fox,” Sasuke says, and Madara turns to smile at him.

“Of course you are,” he says. “However weak you may be, you’re still an Uchiha. Desire for power is in your blood. And the greatest power the shinobi world has ever known is right here.”

Sasuke ignores him, ignores the little throb in his veins that those words produce. He tries to reach his hands through the bars to shake Naruto awake, only to rear back as the thick steam burns him.

Madara is suddenly right behind him, and Sasuke barely avoids the knife aimed for his heart.

Madara clucks. “I thought you’d have better knowledge of the Sharingan by now. Those aren’t bars you can break with by physical force.”

They may not be fighting with physical force at the moment, but that doesn’t stop Sasuke from reaching for his sword. “Naruto,” he says darkly. “A little help?” Naruto doesn’t move. The wound that Tsunade patched for him is a constant, burning ache.

In Madara’s distraction, the genjutsu has started to slip, and the fox seems to shake into consciousness. The creature snarls at Madara, and Madara doesn’t even blink.

Sasuke takes deep breaths, trying to stay equally calm. “Leave Naruto alone, or I will kill you,” he promises.

Madara cocks his head. “Why the sudden concern, Sasuke-kun? Last I heard, you wanted revenge on the Leaf. Why the change of heart?”

Naruto died. Naruto came back to life. Sasuke was going to make sure he stayed that way. His whole world was suddenly riding on it.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he says, and it’s the truth.

Madara shakes his head sadly. “I never thought you’d choose this village over your family. I sorely misjudged you.”

I didn’t, Sasuke thinks. *I chose Naruto*.

Sasuke lunges for Madara, but his hand goes right through him. His opponent flickers and disappears. Sasuke whirls around, but it’s too late. One hand grabs the wrist of his sword arm, another snakes around his neck. He’s yanked backwards as Madara brings a knife to his throat.

“You rely too much on your eyes, Sasuke-kun,” Madara says in his ear, cold and deep-voiced. “Remember who you’re fighting.”

“Fuck you,” Sasuke chokes out. Madara increases the pressure against Sasuke’s throat and, in one easy motion, snaps the bones in Sasuke’s wrist.

Sasuke knows it’s an illusion, but that doesn’t stop the blinding pain from hitting him. Madara shoves him away, and Sasuke barely manages to stay on his feet. When he turns to look over his shoulder, his ancestor’s red eyes are laughing at him. The beast is roaring in its cage, and Naruto is still crumpled on the ground.

Sasuke sets his jaw and switches his sword to his other hand.

“Naruto,” he grits. “Get. Up. Your precious village is about to go up in flames.”

A whimper is his only answer.

“Kyuubi,” Madara calls up. “Obey me. I can give you the power and the freedom you desire.”

The Kyuubi stops gnashing its teeth long enough to look at Madara. He stills suddenly.

“That’s right,” Madara says softly. “You see what I can do for you, don’t you?”

Sasuke flings a shuriken directly at Madara’s head. The shinobi dodges it easily, but it’s enough of a distraction to break the Mangekyo’s spell. The demon starts to fret again, rumbling angrily in his cage.

Madara turns to him calmly, the Mangekyo whirling in its deadly spiral.

“He’s lying,” Sasuke tells the fox, keeping one eye on his opponent as best he can. “If you fall under his control, you’ll never be free. He’ll use you as a tool until he no longer needs you. Is that a fitting end for the mightiest of the tailed beasts?”

If anything, that seems to incite the fox more. The demon roars, and Sasuke can’t help but flinch at the wave power that rushes over him. The water lapping at his ankles begins to boil. Madara is feeling it, too, but then – Madara’s done this before. He’s had experience.

“Stop!” Sasuke commands. He can feel the Mangekyo turning in his eyes, feel the power taking a toll both on the Kyuubi and his own body.

The fox wavers uncertainly, if it’s even possible for a thousand-year-old chakra monster to feel uncertainty. Sasuke takes a step closer, and the Kyuubi snaps its massive teeth.

Sasuke feels Madara’s hand land on the back of his neck, and he reacts, striking out with an elbow. Madara, of course, dodges it. The ancient warrior’s face is tight.

“You’re becoming an annoyance, Sasuke-kun” he says. “I didn’t plan on killing you, but if you keep interfering, I’ll be forced to.”

“Go ahead and try,” Sasuke answers grimly. He’s close enough to Naruto now to see that Naruto’s shoulders are shaking.

“Naruto,” he says. “*Naruto*. Are you even listening to me, moron?”

“He probably can’t hear you,” Madara suggests helpfully. He points to the seal over the bars. The spell is beginning to fray at the edges. “The fox is taking over. There’s nothing you can do.”

Sasuke would believe him, except that he’s seen Naruto do the impossible over and over again – beating opponents twice as strong as he is, winning friends in places where Sasuke swore there were none to be had, *coming back to life*, for godsake. He knows Naruto in a way that Madara could never, and he doesn’t believe for a second that Naruto can’t overcome this, too.

However, there’s nothing wrong with giving the jerk a little push.

“Don’t you *dare* give up on me now,” Sasuke yells. “I’m doing this for you, idiot. The place you fought so hard for is in danger. You’re the one always telling me how important our bonds are. If you want to protect those bonds, then *get up*.”

“I can’t,” Naruto moans.

“Do you hear that?” Madara says, advancing toward them again. “He’s given in. The fox belongs to Uchiha now. If you want it for yourself, you’ll have to fight for it. Alone.”

Sasuke ignores him. “Listen to me,” he says to Naruto, desperate. “*Listen*. I was wrong before when I said our friendship was an accident, okay? There was a reason for it.”

Naruto still won’t look up, but his shoulders stop shaking. Sasuke takes it as encouragement.

“I’m sorry about Iruka,” he continues, seeing Naruto’s wild grief in his mind’s eye. He can’t stop remembering the bodies of his parents, and the grief of another young boy, long ago, who’d just lost his family. He swallows and keeps going. “But that doesn’t mean you’re alone. You still have Sakura, and you have me. We can help you avenge Iruka, but not like this. Not if you just give up.”

Sasuke wishes he had more time, wishes he had bothered, at some point in his life, to learn how to use words instead of weapons. Because they’re all he has right now, and he hasn’t felt so helpless since Itachi walked away from him.

“I came here to destroy Konoha. That’s true. But you convinced me, okay? You were right. The reason,” he falters, then pushes on. “The reason for our friendship was so I could be here, now. I needed to be here when this happened. But it doesn’t work if you’re not willing to fight, too.”

Naruto still isn’t moving, Sasuke realizes in despair. Madara has the fox’s attention again, and the seal over the bars is starting to split. The chakra is spilling out in threatening, molten waves, and Sasuke doesn’t know how much longer he can stay here inside with the Kyuubi. His grasp on the Sharingan is fading from exhaustion, and Madara barely looks ruffled.

“Just a little more,” Madara says softly. “A little longer and you’ll be free.” He’s talking to the fox like it’s a domesticated pet, and it seems to be working. The fox is really and truly awake. Tsunade’s words echo in his mind: *There won’t be any more Naruto*.

Everything in Sasuke tightens in rejection. Damnit, no. That’s not happening. He’s failed so many times before – he lost his family, his brother, his team, his village. He, the prodigy, the last Uchiha. He’s never managed to save a single thing he loved, or win a single battle that mattered. He’s not going to let Madara strip this from him, too.

He drops to his knees by the cage, feeling the steam from the water rise up with scalding pressure against his skin. He reaches his hands through the bars, barely flinching as the red-hot iron brands stripes into his shoulders.

He shakes the blonde’s shoulders violently, and Naruto tenses. “You’re about to die, moron,” he says, almost spitting in his anger. “And you’re going to take everyone in Konoha with you.”

Nothing.

“Except me,” Sasuke threatens. “Because I’ll take my team and run. I won’t even help Sakura. You’ll prove to everyone that you’re the monster they always said you were. Is that how you want to be remembered?”

Still nothing, and Sasuke is so mad he could grind bones between his teeth. The fox is a volcanic, thrashing presence pressed against the bars, and Sasuke feels himself being forced out, being pushed back.

“Damnit,” Sasuke rages. “I won’t you let you do this. You idiot, you *jackass*, the only one allowed to kill you here is *me*.”

Naruto moves. His shoulders curve, and then he’s dragging himself onto his hands and knees. He takes a breath, wrapping his fingers around Sasuke’s wrist, and when he looks up his faced is streaked with tears. “Okay,” he says shakily.

Sasuke smiles in relief. “Okay.”

He hauls Naruto forward, and everything changes in an instant.

Madara stops when he sees Naruto on his feet. The first signs of uncertainty creep into his eyes. Fear.

Naruto’s hands are still trembling, but his face is grimly set. Sasuke feels the bars of the Kyuubi’s prison snap firmly back into place as Naruto steps through to the other side. The temperature drops so suddenly it makes Sasuke’s head spin.

“You,” Naruto says, pointing a finger at Madara. “Geezer. You should have died years ago. And you,” he turns to Sasuke, and Sasuke jumps. “You talk too much.” He begins to lift his arms, and Sasuke wonders if he’s gone crazy.

“There are too many Uchihas in here,” Naruto growls. “Everyone who’s not me, get the *fuck out of my brain*.” He thrusts outstretched palms toward both of them, and Sasuke is flying backwards. Wooden planks break and scatter as he goes sliding across the floor of the Hokage’s tower. Madara lands heavily beside him a second later. He props himself up on his elbows to see Naruto rising.

Chapter 13, in which Team 7 reunites for an EPIC BATTLE OF DOOM

Naruto looks awful. Half the skin is flayed from his face, his clothes are torn and hanging, and there's blood matted in his hair. But he's alive, and the fox's chakra has disappeared. Naruto's back in control. The aura of power is still thick in the air, though, and Sasuke realizes that it's Naruto himself, his own formidable chakra making an appearance.

He's never seen someone shake off the Mangekyo's illusion like that. Naruto's blue eyes are chilly, and for a moment, Sasuke wonders if he'll be killed along with Madara. It's about what he deserves, he figures. But then Naruto reaches down and pulls him to his feet.

Madara recovers quickly, vaulting upright and backing away from the two of them. There's a definite wariness there, now. The rest of the room is watching with wide, fearful eyes. Even Tsunade looks shell-shocked, and Sasuke wonders just what went on while he was trying to rouse Naruto.

"His eyes," Sasuke tries to say, wheezing. Every part of him feels loose and crushed. "Avoid his eyes."

"No," Naruto says, deadly. "We go for the eyes. His eyes are his weakness."

He's right. It's so simple, Sasuke realizes, feeling like a complete moron. If Madara's power is in his eyes, then it's the eyes they need to target. Madara gained his strength by ripping out his brother's eyes; he'd lose it by having his own eyes destroyed.

But first, they have to avoid the Mangekyo. Sasuke's own eyes are burning with strain, and he can feel the blood crusting on his cheeks.

Naruto's healing so quickly that Sasuke can barely keep track of it – split skin sealing together, bruises fading, blood clotting and drying with unnatural speed. The fox's chakra is gone, but there's a faint glow around Naruto's body that Sasuke's never seen before.

Weirder still, Naruto's own eyes are changing. They're darkening, red mixing in with the blue. Not fiery fox red; bloody Sharingan red. His pupils are still locked on Madara's spinning ones, and…it's not having any effect. The Mangekyo isn't working on him anymore.

Naruto's previous words drift through Sasuke's mind. *Itachi…he said…he said he gave me power…*

"Naruto," Sasuke says shakily. "You're – "

"I know," he says. "Let's finish this."

Either Naruto managed to communicate something to Tsunade when Sasuke wasn't looking, or the Sannin is simply still in shock. Either way, the rest of the Konoha shinobi stay back as

Naruto and Sasuke attack.

Sasuke's barely has the energy to keep moving, but Naruto is a ricocheting presence, faster than Sasuke's ever seen him. Between his own power and the hint of Itachi's chakra that Sasuke can feel leaking from him, he's nothing but a blur of motion.

Madara can dodge, but that's about it. He doesn't have enough time to formulate his own attacks before Naruto is on him again, striking with lethal accuracy. Sasuke tries to help by staying out of the way and watching Naruto's back as best he can. He's almost ready to give up paying attention entirely and just go sit in a corner somewhere when he sees Naruto stumble.

The clumsy movement is so at odds with Naruto's current fighting style that at first Sasuke thinks he's imagining things. The mistake gives Madara the opportunity he's been waiting for, and he hurls a kunai straight for Naruto's heart, face savage.

Sasuke deflects it at the last second, and Madara turns on a dime, going for him instead. Sasuke tries to move out of the way, but he's very, very tired. The only thing that saves him is Sakura, throwing her whole weight at him to shove him to the ground.

"Pay attention," she snaps, and Sasuke's not sure if she's talking to him or Naruto. Either way, she's right. That was too close.

Naruto's struggling to rise, a grimace on his face.

"What the hell was that?" Sasuke asks him, pulling him the rest of the way to his feet.

"My body," Naruto says with effort. "After the fox takes over, it…takes a while."

His eyes are hovering halfway between sky-blue and Sharingan-red, and Sasuke watches as he clenches his jaw, visibly steadying himself.

"Next one," Naruto says. "Next one for sure."

He tries to push Sakura behind him, but she holds her ground. "Don't even think about it," she says. She charges Madara, face pulled into fierce lines, and Naruto and Sasuke have no choice but to follow.

The years melt away as the three of them surround their opponent. He's never fought with Naruto and Sakura to kill before – only to defend. It doesn't matter though. Sakura and Naruto fight like they share one brain, and Sasuke has always been able to read Naruto with ease.

They form a triangle around Madara, closing in, and it doesn't matter how fast his ancestor moves; there's nowhere he can go that the three of them can't reach.

Madara's either very stupid, very confident, or both. He flickers out of sight, then reappears between Naruto and Sasuke, a weapon in each hand. But Naruto has Itachi's Sharingan, after all. He beats Madara there by a second, knife aimed.

Sasuke can see the triumph on Naruto's face, the anticipation, the gleam of victory. He waits. He holds his breath, strung on pins and needles…

Naruto falls again.

Fuck.

His body just gives out, and Sasuke sees him splat face-first into the floor, in a movement that would be funny if they weren't mid-battle. His face twisted in pain. Whatever power Itachi gave him, it's not enough to balance out the strain that the Kyuubi put on his body. He's too slow pushing to his feet, and Madara's not one to waste a single opportunity.

Naruto's in too much pain to defend himself and Sakura is too far away. Madara is closing in, just feet away…

If there's one thing Sasuke's always been, it's fast. He slides between Madara and Naruto just in time for the knife to plunge into his own gut.

At first it's just a hot pressure. Then the burning pain hits, and Sasuke tastes blood on his own lips.

"Very noble," Madara murmurs approvingly. "You might be an Uchiha after all." He puts a hand on Sasuke's shoulder and twists the knife viciously upward, ripping through organs and tissue.

Everything in Sasuke's field of vision goes black for a moment, and then he's sinking down, spots swimming in front of his eyes. He can sense Naruto rising behind him, getting back to his feet, as always.

"It's too bad," Madara says, voice soothing. "You actually almost beat me." Sasuke can't move his legs and the pain is overriding the rest of his senses, and he *knows* Naruto can finish it without him but he came so close and…

And then he realizes: for the first time in the entire fight, he has a solid grip on his opponent.

Using the last of his strength, he shoves Madara forward, switching their positions. He registers the knife embedding itself even more firmly in his stomach as he wraps one arm around Madara's throat and the other across his shoulders, holding him in place.

"Naruto, now!" he yells.

Without hesitation and without mercy, Naruto digs his fingers in and rips the eyes from Madara's face.

Naruto scampers out of reach as Madara screams and clutches at the bleeding sockets. The patriarch of the Uchiha clan falls to his knees, convulsing. His face is covered in blood, and Sasuke watches in amazement as his ancestor's body seems to age before his eyes, withering into the old man he would have been without his brother's sacrifice.

Just to be sure, Sasuke pins his chest to the floor with his sword.

Naruto's limping as he approaches the prone body. The newly-aged Uchiha is still, lying face up in his own blood. Naruto leans down and feels for his pulse. By the time he rises, his eyes have faded back to their normal blue.

"We did it," Naruto says. "He's dead." He drops his head for a second, and when he raises it, his face is like the sun.

"Yeah," Sasuke manages.

Naruto looks at him. "I knew you weren't hopeless," he breathes. "I *told* everyone – " His expression changes abruptly. "Sasuke?"

There's a great rushing noise in Sasuke's ears. His back slams up against something with painful force, and then he's staring at the ceiling, gasping for breath.

"Shit," Naruto's face looms over him, fear and anguish all twisted up in his eyes. "Shit shit shit. Look at me," he yells. He's gripping Sasuke's collar, violently shaking him, and Sasuke knows he's worried, but the idiot is making the pain even worse.

Sasuke tries to open his mouth and speak, but he's beyond words. There's red-tinged black creeping in from the corners of his vision, and everything sounds very far away. Sakura appears over him, too, and her expressive eyes keep tipping between practiced professionalism and bone-deep fear. Sasuke's pretty sure that means he's in bad shape.

"Try not to move," she says, and her voice is muffled with tears. *Move*?

"You don't get to die like this," Naruto's blurry face threatens. "You don't *deserve* it, do you hear me? After all the shit you pulled...you…you have to live. You *owe* it to me. You don't get to take the easy way out." His tears hit Sasuke's face, washing away the blood from the Mangekyo.

Sasuke wishes he could strangle him for calling this easy. The pain is so bad that Sasuke wonders if Madara actually ripped the organs from his body. As it is, he has to simply gape up at Naruto like a fish.

Sakura elbows Naruto aside, putting lightly trembling fingers against Sasuke's chest. He's not sure what it does, but it makes the agony fade slightly.

"And I'm not done with you," Naruto continues through clenched teeth. "I haven't beaten you yet. I haven't shown you what Jiraiya taught me. If you die – " he chokes off, and Sakura bites her lip.

For once, Sasuke actually wants to say something reassuring. The room is fading, he knows he's probably dying, but everything feels oddly peaceful. It takes him a moment to figure out why, and when he does, it's like light washes through him. For the first time in his life he's… finished. There's nothing else for him to do.

"If you die," Naruto says again, face crumpling, "I'll jump into hell and drag you back."

Sasuke feels his lips curve. If anyone can do it, he thinks, Naruto can. And that's his last thought as he lets the darkness rise up and swallow him.

Chapter 14, in which this author writes a long-winded but (hopefully) touching conclusion. Enjoy!

"I'm sorry," Sasuke says. "I couldn't do it."

Itachi sits across from him, and it's the old Itachi. Black eyes, gentle face, solemn mouth.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to," Itachi says.

Sasuke looks down at his feet, dark against the blinding white of the room. "It was all for nothing," he whispers.

Itachi gets up from his chair, crosses the space, and crouches in front of Sasuke. Sasuke's looking down at his brother, but he feels young, young, young. Younger than he felt even when he was a little kid, and Itachi was already grown up.

"This is what I wanted," Itachi tells him, smiling. "This is what I planned."

Sasuke feels a lump in his throat. "Then – "

"Then you don't need me anymore. Time to start again."

"But – " *That's not true*, he wants to cry. *I don't know how to do this without you*.

Itachi doesn't poke him in the forehead again, which is good, because Sasuke's verging on tears anyway. Instead, he lays his whole palm against Sasuke's skin, comforting.

"I'm proud," he says quietly. "Now go. Live."

When he looks up, Itachi is gone.

*

Sasuke can tell he's in the hospital before he even opens his eyes. The bed he's in is just a shade too soft, the rhythmic beeping of machines surrounds him, and the smell of antiseptic is strong in the air. A hand drifts in front of his face, and he grabs it instinctively.

"Sasuke-kun, it's me," Sakura says, wincing. "It's just me."

He drops her wrist, and she goes on fiddling with the bag of fluid hanging next his bed. Oxygen, morphine, blood. He wonders how long he's been unconscious. He turns his head to see a sleeping Kakashi in the next bed over, torso swathed in bandages. Sai is one bed down.

"They've started calling it the Uzumaki destructo-ward," Sakura says with a quick smile. "I think it's fitting."

He tries to rub his eyes, only to come up short as something tugs his right wrist. He looks down to see his right hand cuffed to the bedrail, seals encasing the metal surface.

"Sorry," Sakura says, mouth twisting. "Hokage-sama's orders."

"What happened?" he asks groggily.

"Eight tails," she answers quietly. "You pulled him back from eight tails."

Sasuke's entire body feels heavy and deadened, and it makes him uneasy to know he's not in charge of his own faculties. He feels like he's looking at everything through a layer of cotton, and he has to fight the urge to close his eyes and just drift back into sleep.

"My team?" he asks.

Sakura wrinkles her nose. "Locked up, but totally fine," she says dismissively. "They're really annoying, Sasuke-kun."

He smiles slightly, or at least he thinks he does. Sensation is starting to trickle into the center of his stomach, and it's not pleasant. He can still remember Madara's knife cutting through him like butter. The rest of the battle is twisting through his mind in brief, slippery flashes, but he remembers Madara very well. And Naruto. He remembers Naruto.

Somehow, Sakura reads the discomfort on his face. "You've only been out of surgery for a few hours," she says. "You're still in pretty bad shape." She fiddles with something above his head, and the throbbing immediately subsides. His vision, however, gets even fuzzier. He feels like he's falling backwards through a tunnel, with Sakura's face at the center.

"It's okay," she says from far away. "I won't let you miss anything important. Naruto would kill me."

"Thank you," he says sleepily. He's drifting off again, but it's suddenly very important that he get this out. "Thank you for saving him."

He never hears her reply, but as he closes his eyes he feels her fingers, warm and soft against his cheek.

*

They hold his trial in the hospital, because Tsunade insists that he be there to speak for himself and Sakura argues that it's too soon for him to leave his bed. Sai has been out of the hospital for days, but Kakashi nearly fainted with pain when Sakura tried to move him, so they let him stay as well.

Tsunade reads the charges against him as Naruto rocks impatiently on his feet and the elders look anywhere but at his face. There are a lot of official pronouncements and procedures, and by the time they get around to the sentencing, Naruto looks like he's about to crawl up the

walls.

Sasuke listens to everything with half an ear. Maybe it's the pain medication they gave him, but he's feeling oddly complacent. He doesn't much care if they throw him out of Konoha or jail him for the rest of his life. Naruto is alive. Everything else is just background noise.

Sakura and Naruto argue with dizzying fervor in favor of letting him off without any punishment at all ("I'll kick his ass," Naruto promises the council. "I'll kick his ass really hard."). Kakashi and Tsunade are mostly silent, but Sasuke can see the Hokage's dislike for Danzou clear in her eyes. He figures he has that going for him, if nothing else.

"No, absolutely not," says one of the elders, shaking her head. "He attacked the village. There was a room full of witnesses. To let him go free is unthinkable."

"To be fair, he technically attacked the three of you, not Konoha as a whole," Tsunade reminds her.

"It's the same thing," the elder says with dignity, and Tsunade shuts her mouth.

"Look," Naruto says emphatically. "Sasuke's forgiven you for what *you* did. He deserves at least the same treatment, doesn't he?"

It's the first time anyone has mentioned the Uchiha massacre during the trial, although Sasuke guesses from the nervous looks being passed around the room that the topic has been thoroughly discussed behind closed doors. Trust Naruto to break the ice.

And trust Naruto to get it all wrong, as usual.

"I haven't forgiven – " Sasuke begins to correct him, but Kakashi conveniently chooses that moment to knock over the glass of water sitting by his bedside.

"Sorry, sorry," he says pleasantly, waving his hand in apology when everyone turns to stare. "Please continue."

"Right," Naruto says, tearing suspicious eyes from Kakashi's face. "My point is, well…" He stops, confused. "Damn it," he says. "You made me forget."

"What Naruto's trying to say," Sakura cuts in hastily, "is that Sasuke is very very sorry and will promise never to attack the village again. Right, Sasuke-kun?"

And this was very much *not* how he imagined his sentencing, but he can feel Tsunade's topaz eyes promising retribution if he doesn't cooperate, so he sourly says, "Yes."

"See?" Naruto says triumphantly.

Danzou rises to his full height, looking down at all of them. "No," he says. "Just because he's the last of the Uchiha clan, that doesn't mean he should merit special treatment. He's a traitor and should be sentenced as such."

"Stupid coot," Tsunade mutters. The other two elders fidget silently.

"I think you're forgetting," Kakashi breaks in mildly. "He's the last of his clan – true. If he dies then a threat to the village will certainly be removed. However, the last native user of the Sharingan will also be gone, and with it the last known tool to contain the Kyuubi. In case you've forgotten, without Sasuke this village could very well have been destroyed a few days ago."

"Exactly," Naruto yells. "That's what I was getting at." And Sasuke's pretty sure it *wasn't*, but Naruto plows ahead anyway. "Sasuke saved Konoha," he continues. "You should be thanking him, not threatening him."

"Are you implying," Danzou says frostily, "that he did it out of some sort of loyalty for the village?"

Kakashi gives Sasuke an assessing glance. Naruto is looking at him too, and, embarrassingly, Sasuke feels his cheeks begin to redden.

"I would imagine," Kakashi says lightly, "that he did it to save his teammate. Is that right, Sasuke?"

Sasuke doesn't think he's ever felt quite so cornered before.

"I guess," he mutters, and Naruto's own cheeks turn a faint pink.

"And that's supposed to convince me?" Danzou asks scathingly.

"Yes," Tsunade says flatly. "As long as Naruto aligns himself with Konoha, you'll have the Uchiha's allegiance as well. That, along with his ability to subdue the Kyuubi, should be enough to put your mind at ease. Konoha is no longer in any danger from Sasuke." Sasuke can see Sakura smirking from the corner of his eye.

Danzou puts his face very close to Tsunade's, face tight with anger. "This is a mockery," he seethes, "and I refuse to listen to it any more. You have my vote."

And with that, he walks out of the room.

Without his presence, the other two elders look even smaller. All it takes is one hard stare for Tsunade to wear them down.

"Congratulations," she says to him, smiling in a way that's anything but reassuring. "You're free."

*

Kakashi checks out the next day, after making a miraculous recovery that has Sakura scratching her head and Sasuke fairly convinced that he was faking half his symptoms just so

he could observe the trial.

He's dressed as formally as Sasuke's ever seen him, and Sasuke raises and eyebrow when he emerges from the bathroom, ceremonial uniform in place.

"There's a funeral I have to go to," is his quiet answer, and Sasuke swallows.

He knows it wasn't *him* that killed Naruto's mentor – he knows it the way he knows that the sky is blue and two plus two equals four. But somewhere in the back of his brain, there's a voice that sounds suspiciously like Orochimaru that keeps telling him differently. If he hadn't allied himself with Madara in the first place, if he hadn't been there to distract everyone, if he'd realized his mistake just a few months earlier… He didn't throw the shuriken, but it's his fault all the same. He knows Naruto will never blame him for it, and that makes everything just a little bit worse.

All in all, he's not sure he wasn't better off before, when shame was just a distant concept.

Kakashi stops by Sasuke's bed before he leaves, settling his bag on one shoulder.

"Well," he says. "I suppose I should offer my congratulations as well. That doesn't seem quite right, though."

Sasuke thinks about everything he's lost, and everything he's somehow gained back, about Iruka-sensei's coffin being lowered into the ground. No. Congratulations aren't what he needs.

"What would you say, then?" Sasuke asks, trying to keep the curiosity in his voice to a minimum.

"Hmm." Kakashi pretends to think for a second, tapping his fingers against the bedside table. "I considered, 'You got off too easy,' and 'You're lucky I'm not the Hokage,' but neither of those seemed right, either."

"Those sound more like you, at least," Sasuke notes wryly.

Kakashi smiles faintly. "But I think you already know all of that," he finishes.

"So?" Sasuke prompts him.

"You have a second chance," Kakashi says, suddenly serious. "I'd advise you not to waste it."

Sasuke looks down at his hands as silence settles over the room. "What now?" he asks in a low voice.

Kakashi's puts a hand on the top of his head, and Sasuke feels the forgiveness in that pressure, right down to his toes. "Now you figure out how to live for something other than revenge."

*

Naruto comes to see him the morning after Kakashi checks out, looking physically recovered but oddly subdued.

"You're a thief," is what he opens with, throwing himself into the chair next to Sasuke's bed. Sasuke looks and, sure enough, Naruto's necklace is back where it belongs, safe and sound around the blonde's neck.

"Hn," Sasuke says.

Naruto sighs. "Danzou has it in for you. The old lady is considering putting a private guard outside your hospital room."

Something in Sasuke stands up and protests at the thought of being babysat. "It's not necessary," he says.

"Probably not," Naruto answers. "But it would look bad for the village if the Hokage pardoned you, then let you get assassinated."

Sasuke certainly can't argue with that logic. He's been waiting for the right time to ask, but he's just about reached the end of his patience.

"When the hell did you start being able to use the Sharingan?" he blurts.

Naruto shrugs. "That was the first time it happened. I've tried to do it again a few times since then, but I can't make it work. Maybe Itachi only meant for me to use it once."

"Good," Sasuke says, before he can stop himself. Naruto is strong enough without any special eye technique to help him out. The thought of the Sharingan under his control gives Sasuke a headache.

Naruto doesn't like that answer, though. He glares, rising from his seat. "Like I even want your stupid Sharingan. I've never needed it before, have I?"

"You probably wouldn't have beaten Madara without it," Sasuke points out.

"Who's the one in the hospital bed?" Naruto shoots back, and Sasuke raises an eyebrow.

"Only because you were too clumsy to stay on your feet."

Naruto's teeth click together. "Oh, I can't *wait* until you're healthy enough to fight again. As soon as you're out of here, I swear…"

"And why would I want to waste my time fighting a dead-last like you?" Sasuke asks, enjoying the familiar banter a little too much.

Naruto doesn't snap back, though. He looks away instead.

"Wouldn't you?" Naruto asks, and the tone in the room changes abruptly. His eyes are suddenly everywhere but Sasuke's face, and there's a vulnerability to his voice that wasn't there a moment ago. He's not just asking about a fight.

When Sasuke doesn't answer immediately, Naruto scowls down at his feet. He looks so much like a twelve-year-old that Sasuke wants to laugh. "No one's forcing you to stay," he mutters.

He considers reminding the blonde that he chased Sasuke halfway across the earth trying to do just that, and that he would probably do it all over again if Sasuke were to leave now. Sasuke thinks he should probably be annoyed by that, but it soothes him instead.

He's careful to avoid Naruto's eyes. "And what if I want to stay?"

Naruto jerks in surprise. "What?"

"My team stays together," Sasuke says quickly, and Naruto frowns. "I'm not part of Kakashi's squad anymore, and I haven't been for a long time." Naruto opens his mouth to protest, but Sasuke pushes on. "And I won't be an errand boy for the elders. I choose my missions, and I report to Tsunade alone."

"Godaime will never – "

"She will," Sasuke interrupts coolly. "If she wants the use of the Sharingan she will."

Now Naruto's the one who looks annoyed, but he gives a curt nod.

"But…" Sasuke plucks at his blanket, looking down. It's ridiculous how hesitant he feels. "Maybe I could borrow you and Sakura for missions sometimes. When it's necessary. Besides, you'll need someone to teach you how to use that Sharingan if it comes back."

When he looks up again, Naruto is staring at him in amazement.

"What?" Sasuke asks shortly.

Naruto shakes his head, as though clearing it. "Nothing."

They look at each other for a moment, until Sasuke can't take it anymore. He breaks eye contact, turning his face toward the window. The sky over Konoha is painfully blue. He can see the academy's youngest generation crawling all over the ruins of the Hokage's tower. They're brandishing hammers and plywood, working busily as their team leaders observe from below. It seems every genin in the village has been assigned the task of fixing the old structure. Rebuilding.

Sasuke feels Naruto's palm land lightly on his shoulder, then slide around his neck in a hug. Sasuke closes his eyes and lets himself lean into the embrace, just a little.

"Hey," Naruto says, pulling away. His voice is suddenly excited. "When you get out of here,

we’ll have to go get ramen to celebrate. Y’know, since neither of us died."

"Permanently," Sasuke reminds him quietly.

"Bah. That’s the only kind that matters," Naruto says impatiently. "Although…" He grins in a way that makes Sasuke instantly wary.

"What?

"The bill’s on you. *Forever*."

Sasuke looks at him, at his wide open face. *Itachi*, he thinks. *Is this why?* Itachi’s voice is well and truly gone, though. It’s painful, but not cripplingly so. Not anymore. Even that will be okay, eventually.

He doesn’t tell Naruto, of course. Not with the idiot standing there, looking so satisfied. He just snorts.

"Dream on, loser," he says.

And Naruto smiles.

THE END

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